

**Stories Between Tears and Laughter:  
Reception Study of Popular Czech Cinema (1989-2010)**

Richard Vojvoda

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
University of East Anglia, School of Art, Media and American Studies  
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## Abstract

This thesis explores discourses about the nature and role of Czech national cinema constructed and circulating in Czech media roughly during the first two decades after the fall of communism in 1989. It pays attention especially to notions of quality and value constructed around films in pre-release materials and critical discourses circulating in the daily press and in specialised cultural and academic publications.

Czech cinema, similar to many other national cinemas of the former Eastern Bloc, faced several challenges after the dissolution of the communist regime, including lack of financial support from the state, decreasing audiences, and influx of Hollywood films. This thesis will explore the different ways film critics but also films themselves react to and negotiate different notions of value in the changing conditions of the post-communist environment. To do this, this thesis adopts historical reception studies approach and will draw on the existing work of Barbara Klinger, Thomas Austin, Mark Jancovich, Ernest Mathijs and others in this area.

Recent academic work on cinemas of Central and Eastern Europe has been reminding us that pre-transition attention on these cinemas tended to be affected by Western interests in radical 'art cinema'. Some academics have therefore increasingly aimed to explore the different popular forms of these cinemas. This thesis will also contribute to this growing body of work. Through the study of films and the ancillary materials that accompany film's circulation, such as promotional articles and reviews, this thesis explores the shifting attitudes towards the popular and the different meanings 'the popular' accrues in negotiations of the place of Czech cinema in a globalised world. This thesis argues that circulating notions of value are not stable, constant, and homogeneous, but instead shift, develop in time, and are adapted by different groups for different purposes. Together, however, they help to shape the complex mosaic of perceptions about what national cinema is and should be like.

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## Introduction: Canons of Czech Cinema

Since the fall of communist regimes in countries of the former Eastern Bloc film scholars have sought to problematize some of the assumptions that had shaped cinema histories of the region. For instance, they have brought attention to the ideological interests underpinning the canonisation of certain types of films. Anikó Imre points out that that approaches to Eastern European cinemas had strongly been informed by Western paradigms; films from the region had normally been 'evaluated by the West, in the West, and for the West on a selective basis, privileging films and directors who took an oppositional stand in relation to communist totalitarianism in their filmic commentaries'.<sup>1</sup> As Imre continues, this focus left many areas of film cultures neglected: 'The preoccupation with national cinema's and the national auteur's ideological commitment, while undoubtedly relevant, left little else to be considered'.<sup>2</sup> One of the tasks scholars have set for themselves after the fall of communist regimes is to pay more attention to the areas of cinema production that the limited lens of 'auteur as a radical artist' neglected.

It has also become commonly accepted that while the figure of the oppositional national auteur representing Eastern European national cinemas at international film festivals has traditionally been the centre around which histories of Eastern European cinemas have been written and evaluated, change in the political situation did not raise the profile of these national cinemas. Repeatedly, film scholars have argued that interest in cinemas from the region has even decreased after the fall of the Iron Curtain. As Ewa Mazierska points out, 'Eastern European cinema is now regarded as even less fashionable than it was'.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Peter Hames and Catherine Portuges argue that in the last few decades 'a generation of critics and audiences have grown up for whom the cinemas of Eastern Europe are very much unknown territory'.<sup>4</sup> While Hames and Portuges seem to be arguing that cinemas of the region deserve more attention because they have produced at least some films that adhere to certain notions of value and quality, others have indicated

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<sup>1</sup> Anikó Imre, 'Introduction: East European Cinemas in New Perspectives', in *East European Cinemas*, ed. by Anikó Imre (London; New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. xi-xxvi (p. xii).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. xii-xiii.

<sup>3</sup> Ewa Mazierska, 'Eastern European Cinema: Old and New Approaches', *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* 1.1 (2010), 5-16, p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> Catherine Portuges, and Peter Hames, 'Introduction', in *Cinemas in Transition in Central and Eastern Europe After 1989*, ed. by Catherine Portuges, and Peter Hames (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013), pp. 1-9 (p. 3).

that one of the reasons behind this decreased interest is in fact the difficulty of applying former commonly used interpretative strategies in evaluations of these films. Imre points out that 'With the oppositional political ground pulled out from under them, most of the new films have been deemed less impressive, both aesthetically and ideologically, than those made during the heroic decades of socialism'.<sup>5</sup>

This perception of inferiority of much of post-communist cinema can definitely be observed in existing work on Czech cinema. There have, in fact, been relatively few academic studies produced on post-communist Czech cinema in general. Moreover, quite often the existing research struggles not to reaffirm the existing hierarchies and perceptions that these films are of lesser quality. Regarding the existing academic literature on post-1989 Czech cinema available in English, Francesco Pitassio notices that, 'in what research has been produced, the focus is often on issues of authors and style, with related attempts to trace lineages connecting the golden era of the Czech and Slovak New Wave to the less highly regarded present time'.<sup>6</sup> Pitassio brings attention to several issues in literature on Czech post-communist cinema: on the one hand there is an over-reliance on film-centred approaches that tend to overlook the variety of contexts these films have been consumed in by different audiences. At the same time, these studies rarely go beyond merely reaffirming notions of mediocrity of recent productions of this national cinema.

For an example of this tendency we can look at Peter Hames's overview of Czech post-1989 cinema output who concludes his essay by saying that: 'the films produced in the 1990s, despite considerable achievements, still do not match those of the "Socialist" 1960s'.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Andrej Halada, who wrote one of the first more extensive evaluations of post-communist Czech cinema, finds Czech cinema of the 1990s to be lacking. While, according to him, 'the overall level of film production increased from 1992 to 1996', these films remain in the shadow of a more glorious past.<sup>8</sup> As he says,

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<sup>5</sup> Imre, 'Introduction: East European Cinemas in New Perspectives', p. xvii.

<sup>6</sup> Francesco Pitassio, 'Popular Nostalgia: On Alternative Modes of Popular Cinema in Post-1989 Czech Production', in *Popular Cinema in East Central Europe: Film Cultures and Histories*, ed. by Dorota Ostrowska, Francesco Pitassio, and Zsuzsanna Varga (London; New York: I. B. Tauris, 2017), pp. 215-232 (p. 215).

<sup>7</sup> Peter Hames, 'The Czech and Slovak Republics: Velvet Revolution and After', in *Cinemas in Transition in Central and Eastern Europe After 1989*, ed. by Catherine Portuges, and Peter Hames (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013), pp. 40-74 (p. 71).

<sup>8</sup> Andrej Halada, *Český film devadesátých let: Od Tankového praporu ke Koljovi* (Prague: Lidové noviny, 1997), p. 196.

The sixties really seem to be the artistically most fruitful period of Czech film as a whole.... Subsequent development, however, meant a decrease from such a level, even though even seventies and eighties brought some very good accomplishments in individual cases. Czech film after 1945 has its horizon in the sixties, towards which the way led upwards, then the descent into averageness followed. The nineties continue to follow this standard of artistically not very substantial production.<sup>9</sup>

Many arguments in both Halada's and Hames's texts are largely concerned with the changing conditions in the industry, especially the drastic decrease of state funding in the 1990s. After the Velvet Revolution in 1989 which marked the end of the communist regime and command economy in the country, the film industry was treated 'as a business like any other'<sup>10</sup> and the state showed little willingness to subsidise it. While the issues with transition to the market model and the subsequent lack of funding are certainly valid concerns, both Halada and Hames have a tendency to rely on the binary opposition 'artistic freedom vs. commerce', which positions the whole output of post-communist cinema as compromised by the commercial pressures of the market. It appears that, in the commercial environment in which Czech filmmakers found themselves in after 1989, creativity and quality can barely survive. Hames says that 'without some kind of radical support structure, it seems that we can look forward to a future of thwarted talents and lost opportunities'.<sup>11</sup> Halada similarly thinks that in the commercial environment 'the audience and financial pressure lead ... to pandering and small ambitions'.<sup>12</sup> In this regard, he believes, 'Czech commercial films are as a whole equally bad as their pre-war predecessors'.<sup>13</sup> It seems to me that such an approach that can only see cinema as haunted by the commercial environment it operates in simply does not produce or encourage deeper understanding, as it leaves the majority of existing films deadlocked in the state of perceived inferiority. This thesis therefore proposes that much more attention needs to be paid to reception of Czech cinema. Very few attempts have been made to explore what meanings circulate around Czech films in different contexts but also what unstated assumptions and ideas of value underly the debates about them.

In fact, a common approach to dealing with the issue of quality in contemporary Czech cinema has been to elevate a few examples that seem to have arisen despite the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Portuges and Hames, 'Introduction', p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Hames, 'The Czech and Slovak Republics', p. 71.

<sup>12</sup> Halada, *Český film devadesátých let*, p. 214.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.



inadequate conditions in the national film industry. Therefore, films of Jan Svěrák are for example usually highlighted in existing overviews of the 1990s Czech cinema.<sup>14</sup> However, these valorisations often rely on ideas of some seemingly universal quality that are never scrutinised. Virtually no attention has been paid to the justifications on which these claims of value are being made. For example, in one attempt to extend the approaches applied to post-communist Czech cinema, Jan Čulík looks at a vast amount of films made in the first 18 years after the revolution. In his ambitious book, the title of which can be translated as *What We Are Like: Czech Society in Fiction Film of the Nineties and Noughties*, he draws on Kracauer's work on German cinema and attempts to analyse the images and value systems permeating Czech cinema. As he says, his aim is to uncover what films express about 'contemporary society, the nature of Czechness, the role and situation of Czechs and Czech nation in the past and present'.<sup>15</sup> He therefore outlines a wide variety of films in different sections which are divided based on the periods these films are set in and the themes they deal with. However, in a rather curious step, the conclusion of his book includes a list of the 'best 45 films' that he believes will survive the test of time. It is an interesting decision because such a search for some kind of cultural value did not seem to figure in the book's goals. Acknowledging the discourse of inferiority that has governed much of the writing on post-communist Czech cinema, Čulík writes that 'Despite the fact that according to critics the majority of contemporary Czech films are "bad," I am convinced that the majority of the above mentioned forty "best" pictures will survive long – quality-wise, they equal even international productions'.<sup>16</sup> The question of survival of these films is of course interesting. Čulík indicates that the standing of films in canons is not fixed but a matter of negotiation and fluctuation. However, no consideration is paid to this negotiation and the criteria of value Čulík or anyone else might employ in it. In Čulík's writing it seems that such canonisation occurs seemingly organically by a broader recognition of what seems to be the film's inherent qualities, that this critic has already recognised. The state of such hierarchies as 'product[s] of the cultural distinctions through which the tastes of certain groups are rejected and the tastes of others acquire authority'<sup>17</sup> simply has not been sufficiently analysed in the Czech context.

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<sup>14</sup> For example in Hames, 'The Czech and Slovak Republics: Velvet Revolution and After', Jan Čulík, *Jací sme: Česká společnost v hraném filmu devadesátých a nultých let* (Brno: Host, 2007), pp. 583-4.

<sup>15</sup> Čulík, *Jací sme*, p. 24.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 585.

<sup>17</sup> Andy Willis, 'Cultural Studies and Popular Film', in *Approaches to Popular Film*, ed. by Joanne Hollows and Mark Jancovich (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 173-191 (p. 189).

More importantly, however, the search for some notions of cultural value that critics struggle to identify in films has left Czech post-socialist cinema a largely unexplored area. As Petra Hanáková has commented on the existing scholarly work, 'It is as if the cinema of the transition period defies conceptualization and apprehension, and as if the well-known Polish saying "it is as difficult to understand as a Czech film" came in our times to haunt the reflection of Czech cinema itself'.<sup>18</sup> Despite the fact that ten years have already passed since Hanáková's comment, recent issue of magazine *Cinepur* focused on post-1989 Czech cinema makes very similar observations, saying that 'we generally know only very little about the transition era of Czech film. The turn of the nineties, as well as the whole following decade in which filmmakers reaped the consequences of this transformation remains a practically unknown chapter in the history of Czech cinema'.<sup>19</sup> The aim of this thesis is therefore twofold: to contribute to the exploration of post-communist Czech cinema on the one hand, but also to problematise some of the unquestioned assumptions and discourses that have been underling evaluations of Czech post-communist cinema. These processes have fruitfully been explored in numerous works on film reception in other national contexts and it is therefore the approach this thesis will mainly draw on.

This gap in existing work on Czech cinema has previously been recognised by Francesco Pitassio who notices the lack of attention on the 'sense-making practices of criticism and research'.<sup>20</sup> However, Pitassio's essay on popular post-communist Czech cinema still remains relatively centred on film texts themselves. Despite considering the contexts of production these films were made in, and even considering the film's circulation on television, Pitassio spends considerable time finding thematic similarities between films made before and after the Velvet Revolution and does not look at the variety of meanings circulating around these films for different groups.

An important step in analysing the assumptions figuring in perceptions about Czech cinema, has been done by Jindřiška Bláhová who has looked at developments in the critical reception of *Closely Watched Trains (Ostře sledované vlaky*; Jiří Menzel, 1966) by Western critics in the 1960s. As Bláhová points out, Western critics gradually started regarding the film as a central work of what has come to be known as the Czechoslovak New Wave. *Closely*

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<sup>18</sup> Petra Hanáková, 'Imagining National Identity in Czech Postcommunist Cinema', in *Visegrad Cinema: Points of Contact from New Waves to the Present*, ed. by Petra Hanáková and Kevin B. Johnson (Prague: Casablanca, 2010), pp. 155-170 (p. 156).

<sup>19</sup> Lukáš Skupa, 'Film po sametu', *Cinepur*, 127 (2020), p. 56.

<sup>20</sup> Toby Miller quoted in Pitassio, 'Popular Nostalgia: On Alternative Modes of Popular Cinema in Post-1989 Czech Production', p. 216.

*Watched Trains* thus, according to Bláhová, significantly ‘shaped the way in which Czechoslovak, and Czech film has been evaluated and measured in a long term’.<sup>21</sup> While many American critics in the 1960s praised the film’s balance of humour and tragedy and focus on the story of ‘ordinary’ people, the film was not always positively received in countries of Western Europe. However, Bláhová notices a difference in interpretations of the film made in the press after the invasion of Czechoslovakia by armies of the Warsaw Pact in August 1968. This invasion ended the brief period of democratisation in the country known as the Prague Spring, and was followed by a period of ‘normalisation’ which was meant to remove the reforms made by the Prague Spring government. In the context of the reception of *Closely Watched Trains*, the invasion also provided a topical reference that gave the film a specific relevance. The film was more commonly interpreted as a ‘gesture of creative resistance’ and ‘Criticism became for many a public space for expressing solidarity’.<sup>22</sup> Bláhová argues that such interpretations reinforced specific perceptions about Czech filmmakers, which placed emphasis on the romanticised ‘image of a total clash between the “artist” and the system’.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, *Closely Watched Trains* gradually came to represent a key work in the canon of Czechoslovak New Wave, demonstrating values based on which other films were categorised as ‘more, or conversely less, “Czech New Wave”’.<sup>24</sup> A specific set of elements that were being interpreted as the ‘basic generic “national” signs of Czechoslovak production as such’ crystallised: ‘humour, a sense for the ordinary, realness between tragedy and comedy, the little Czech man’.<sup>25</sup> In this thesis I argue that, indeed, the terms Bláhová finds to have taken shape in foreign reception of *Closely Watched Trains* as signs of Czechness, strongly figure in perceptions about Czech cinema in the first few decades following the Velvet Revolution in 1989. Constructions of Czech cinema continue to resort to concepts such as humour, tragedy, and focus on ‘ordinary’ people. However, I demonstrate that these perceptions are not always tied to ideas of cultural value, but they shift based on the contexts they are appropriated in. This thesis explores a variety of these contexts and identifies not only shifting notions of value but also changing perceptions about the role of Czech cinema.

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<sup>21</sup> Jindřiška Bláhová, ‘České hubičky na vývoz: Distribuce a recepce Ostře sledovaných vlaků v západní Evropě a v USA’, in *Ostře sledované vlaky*, ed. by Lukáš Skupa (Prague: NFA, 2014), pp. 64-91 (p. 80).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 88-9.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., pp. 83-4.

Before I outline the arguments of this thesis in more detail, I would like to first place this study in the context of broader debates about Eastern European cinemas.

### National and Transnational Approaches

As I indicated above, studying Eastern European cinemas is seen to have become less interesting after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Scholars have noticed that cinemas of the region are often excluded from publications written on European cinema, or on broader topics such as gender or genre.<sup>26</sup> Imre finds that one of the influences behind the marginalisation of cinemas of the region was the predominant focus on them through the lens of national cinemas constructed around national auteurs. She argues that 'locking these cinemas within their regional Cold War specificity and, further, in national specificities paradoxically contributed to the isolation of the bloc from the rest of the world and the isolation of national cultures from one another'.<sup>27</sup> Academics have therefore highlighted the need to broaden existing approaches to studying cinemas of the region. This on the one hand meant including 'theoretical perspectives that the Cold War ideology and the practical realities of the Iron Curtain kept in obscurity'.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, it also included questioning the perceptions that these cinemas are neatly divided around national borders. Instead, highlighting and exploring the exchanges and collaborations between countries of the region and Europe as a whole during the socialist period has become important in order to put 'into question the image of a region entirely determined and dominated by Soviet socialism, cut off from the bloodstream of European culture and economy'.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, the post-communist transition has increased the level of significance of considering transnational exchanges, as national cinemas of the region have become increasingly dependent on investments from foreign productions. As Imre says, 'the state's most important job has become the creation of an economic environment that allows for the gradual lowering of regulation to seduce the foreign investment'.<sup>30</sup>

The turn to transnational studies has also further importance, since the concept of national cinemas has been problematised beyond the circle of Eastern European studies. It has become commonly accepted that approaching cinema cultures 'as a seamless totality

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<sup>26</sup> See for example Mazierska, 'Eastern European Cinema: Old and New Approaches', p. 13.

<sup>27</sup> Imre, Anikó, 'Introduction: East European Cinemas in New Perspectives', p. xiii.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. xv.

<sup>29</sup> Imre, 'Introduction: Eastern European Cinema: From *No End* to the End (As We Know It)', p. 12.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp. 3-4.

that somehow accurately expresses, describes, and itemises the salient concerns and features of a given national culture' is a limited approach, not least because it overshadows the diversity of given cultures and different forms of exchanges taking place between them.<sup>31</sup> As a result, increasing emphasis has been placed on cinema as an essentially transnational phenomenon. As Mette Hjort points out, quite often the term transnational has been used to answer questions that would have previously been part of an interest in national cinemas.<sup>32</sup> In the context of Eastern European cinema, contributing to transnational debates has therefore formed part of attempts to make sure that studies of Eastern European cinemas engage with issues being debated wider in the field. As Mazierska argues, it is important that 'we do not talk only to each other, but also to the wider world'.<sup>33</sup>

The decision of this thesis to focus on a single national cinema might therefore seem to go against the trend to emphasise the transnational exchanges and elements that influence cinemas of the region. However, this does not mean that looking at a national cinema is not a valid endeavour. As Hjort again argues a 'wide range of questions associated with national cinema models remain pertinent today (although they may need to be taken up in ways that reflect changed circumstances)'.<sup>34</sup> In this thesis I approach Czech cinema as a discursive construct appropriated in different ways by different institutions and groups. It seems to me that this approach allows me to consider varying ideas and opinions on what Czech cinema is and therefore not enforce high levels of homogeneity, while also allowing me to explore how these ideas about the national interact and are negotiated in relation to ideas about the 'outside'.

This approach also allows me to analyse the importance the idea of national cinema still has for some institutions. For instance, Higson points out that 'if the concept of national cinema is considered troublesome at the level of theoretical debate, it is still a considerable

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<sup>31</sup> Mette Hjort and Scott Mackenzie, 'Introduction', *Cinema and Nation*, ed. by Mette Hjort and Scott Mackenzie (London; New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 1-14 (p. 3).

<sup>32</sup> Mette Hjort, 'On the Plurality of Cinematic Transnationalism', in *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, ed. by Nataša Đurovičová and Kathleen Newman (London; New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 12-33 (p. 12).

<sup>33</sup> Mazierska, 'Eastern European Cinema: Old and New Approaches', p. 13. For some other publications employing transnational approaches in the study of Eastern European cinemas, see for example Dina Iordanova, *Cinema of the Other Europe: The Industry and Artistry of East Central European Film* (London; New York: Wallflower, 2003), Michael Gott and Todd Herzog (eds.), *East, West and Centre: Reframing Post-1989 European Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), Ewa Mazierska, and Michael Goddard (eds.), *Polish Cinema in a Transnational Context* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2014).

<sup>34</sup> Hjort, 'On the Plurality of Cinematic Transnationalism', p. 13.

force at the level of state policy'.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, even the Czech Republic, which has been criticised by writers for not providing enough support for the national cinema, did take some measures that were meant to preserve it and support its development. The law 241/1992 Sb passed in 1992 established the *State Fund for the Development of Czech Cinematography* which was meant to offer some financial support for national cinema, despite the fact that, as indicated above, the financial resources it operated with have been deemed by many as insufficient.<sup>36</sup> Another area in which the idea of the national persists, however, is the film industry itself. On the one hand, Portuges and Hames argue that 'All of the countries [of Eastern Europe], including even a relatively large nation such as Poland, have film markets too small to sustain the increased costs of film production, and they have become dependent on a number of strategies for survival'.<sup>37</sup> However, in the Czech context these strategies rarely involve intentionally producing films with international audiences in mind, in the way some cinemas of small nations do.<sup>38</sup> As Pitassio points out, Czech cinema 'is little-known beyond the national borders and does not do too well at international film festivals'.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, the primary audience for many Czech films is often imagined mainly around national borders. One article published in Czech press therefore argues that foreign markets are treated 'mostly as a question of prestige' rather than economic necessity.<sup>40</sup> According to one film producer, 'the foreign market is essentially economically uninteresting'.<sup>41</sup> This producer thinks that 'Czech films generally sell very badly because they deal with issues and topics that don't interest foreign countries. From our point of view, the domestic market is the main one'.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, Andrej Halada finds Czech films produced in the 1990s to have merely 'domestic significance and resonance' (which he implies to be a sign of their inferiority, compared to those films made in the 1960s).<sup>43</sup>

It needs to be pointed out, however, that Czech films enjoy some level of popularity in Slovakia as well. One study for example finds that between the years 1996 and 2012

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<sup>35</sup> Andrew Higson, 'The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema', in *Cinema and Nation*, ed. by Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie (London; New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 63-74.

<sup>36</sup> Aleš Danielis, 'Česká filmová distribuce po roce 1989', *Illuminace*, 19.1 (2007), 53-104, p. 59.

<sup>37</sup> Portuges, and Hames, 'Introduction', p. 3.

<sup>38</sup> Mette Hjort and Duncan Petrie, 'Introduction', in *The Cinema of Small Nations*, ed. by Mette Hjort and Duncan Petrie (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp. 1-19 (p. 15).

<sup>39</sup> Pitassio, 'Popular Nostalgia', p. 219.

<sup>40</sup> Jindřiška Bláhová, 'Český film se prodává těžko', *Lidové noviny*, 8 July 2008, p. 3.

<sup>41</sup> Pavel Strnád quoted in *Ibid*.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>43</sup> Halada, *Český film devadesátých let*, p. 196.

admissions in Slovakia constituted 44% of all foreign admissions for Czech films.<sup>44</sup> This, of course, does not indicate what percentage this market constitutes in total admissions of Czech films. It however brings attention to the historically interconnected nature of Czech and Slovak cinemas. Hames argues that Czech and Slovak film industries have long been considered separate, even during the existence of Czechoslovakia.<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, there are numerous reasons to question an easy differentiation between the two national cinemas; after all, Hames himself largely considers traditions of both cinemas together throughout his book. However, on the level of discourse, the idea of national audience remains important for Czech filmmakers.

Furthermore, criticisms directed at the insufficient levels of state support for national cinema indicate another site in which the idea of national cinema remains prominent – the institution that Christian Metz, or rather his translator Ben Brewster, collectively labelled ‘the cinematic writer’.<sup>46</sup> Under this term Metz includes various types of writing on film – critics, historians and theoreticians.<sup>47</sup> Despite the rather limited amount of academic work on Czech post-communist cinema, Czech cinema has a special position in the sphere of mainstream film criticism. Often a sense of responsibility is connected to the role and relationship of criticism with Czech cinema. In his preface to Halada’s book, critic Jan Lukeš argues that art and criticism are ‘conjoined vessels’ that are meant to work together.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, ‘The success of Czech cinema in the 1960s was not based only on the connection of sensitive and perceptive dramaturgy with provident production, but also on the exceptionally agile role of film criticism’.<sup>49</sup> Lukeš therefore finds that the task that both Czech cinema and criticism face is to ‘renew memory about itself’.<sup>50</sup> In another article critic Kamil Fila similarly thinks that ‘traditional film criticism’ has the desire to ‘nurture Czech film, look after its development and discuss with authors on an almost dramaturgical level “how to do it so that art thrives”’.<sup>51</sup> In opposition to traditional critics, he believes that young ‘irresponsible’ critics pay little attention to Czech films. As he says, they lack the willingness

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<sup>44</sup> André Lange, ‘The Production and Circulation of Films from the EU New member States (1996–2012)’, paper presented at the Audiovisual Summit *From MEDIA to CREATIVE EUROPE. The experiences of the MEDIA Programme in New Europe Countries. Challenges for the Future* organised by the Media Desk Poland and the Polish Ministry of Culture, Warsaw, 10–12 December 2013).

<sup>45</sup> Peter Hames, *Czech and Slovak Cinema: Theme and Tradition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), pp. 9–12.

<sup>46</sup> Christian Metz, ‘The Imaginary Signifier’, transl. by Ben Brewster, *Screen*, 16.2 (1975), 14–76, p. 20.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Jan Lukeš in Halada, *Český film devadesátých let*, p. 11.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>50</sup> Lukeš in Halada, *Český film devadesátých let*, p. 10.

<sup>51</sup> Kamil Fila, ‘Zdejší filmaři: rozbředlí a ubití,’ *Hospodářské noviny*, 8 July 2005, p. 9.

‘to lead a mutually enriching dialogue’.<sup>52</sup> In these accounts the critic is presented as a knowledgeable spectator that should play an active role in the cultivation of national cinema.

This thesis therefore looks at national cinema as a discursive construct – a series of perceptions articulated and relied on by different institutions. For the purposes of this thesis I focus especially on the ‘image and idea’<sup>53</sup> of Czech cinema arising at the intersection of the film industry and the cinematic writer. I explore the ideas about what Czech cinema is and conversely what it should be according to different users of the term.

### Czech Popular Cinema

As I mentioned above, scholarly works on Eastern European cinemas written in recent years have often sought to bring attention to forms of cinema that had been neglected in the past. Part of the project has been exploring cinemas of the region as popular rather than just a set of art cinema traditions. This gap was addressed, for instance at a conference *Lost Cinema* organised in 2007 in Tallinn and the subsequent special issue of *Place and Location: Studies in Environmental Aesthetics and Semiotics* that presented some research from the conference. The aims of the conference were to bring attention back to forms of socialist cinemas that were evading academic scrutiny, and had become the ‘lost cinema’ – the ‘popular cinema, cartoon animation, documentary film-making, educational cinema, children’s films, low-brow comedies’.<sup>54</sup> In a more recent publication, Dorota Ostrowska, Francesco Pitassio and Zsuzsanna Varga focus specifically on East Central Europe – Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland. With an aim to address the common exclusion of Eastern Europe from accounts on European popular cinemas, they bring attention to transnational exchanges as well as national traditions of these cinemas emerging during the socialist periods and after. This thesis aims to build on this existing work and explore Czech cinema as a ‘popular’ phenomenon. Indeed, I analyse the shifting meanings such a designation accrues and how it figures in notions of quality and value of Czech cinema.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, ‘The German Cinema as Image and Idea’, in *Encyclopaedia of European Cinema*, ed. by Ginette Vincendeau (London: Cassell, 1995), pp. 172-175.

<sup>54</sup> Eva Näripea, and Andreas Trossek, ‘Foreword’, in *Via Transversa: Lost Cinema of the Former Eastern Bloc*, ed. by Eva Näripea and Andreas Trossek (Tallin: Estonian Academy of Arts, 2008), pp. 7-11 (p. 7).



The reason behind this emphasis is the fact that cinema has often been seen as popular in the 'market' definition of the word in the Czech Republic.<sup>55</sup> In this country of around 10 million people it was common for cinemas to sell over 50 million tickets every year before 1989. After the Velvet Revolution these numbers decreased drastically, however. In 1999, admissions dropped to a historical low of 8.3 million.<sup>56</sup> Since then the situation has somewhat stabilised and Czech cinemas have been relatively steadily attracting over 10 million spectators almost every year since 2001 (2019 was the most successful year since 1993, with over 18 million tickets sold).<sup>57</sup> In fact, one writer argues that when cinema attendance dropped in the nineties, distributors first did not consider this to be a major issue – revenues were not majorly affected due to the increasing ticket prices. As he says, 'Distributors commented on it with slight optimism. They had no idea how much further attendance can plummet. We dropped to the level of successful European countries in the number of visits per citizen. And people have always gone to cinema after all...'.<sup>58</sup> This writer indicates that distributors were counting on the status of cinema as a popular medium in a hope that people will keep the industry afloat.

Similarly, despite the decreased audience attendance in the nineties, Czech films often register among the most attended films in Czech cinemas. In 2005, film critic Darina Křivánková wrote an article for the daily newspaper *Lidové noviny* about the dedication of Czech audiences to domestic films. She reports that 'Czechs like Czech films. That is (for now) an indisputable fact for which all neighbouring countries envy us. If a domestic hit is born, even *The Lord of the Rings* or *Harry Potter* don't stand a chance'.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, it occasionally becomes the case that Czech films attract more audiences than Hollywood blockbusters. In 2003, one of the years that Křivánková writes about, *Pupendo* (Jan Hřebejk, 2003) topped the box office and beat *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (Peter Jackson, 2002), *The Matrix Reloaded* (Lilly Wachowski, Lana Wachowski, 2003) and *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (Chris Columbus, 2002) on the second, third and fourth place, respectively.

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<sup>55</sup> For an overview of the different uses of the word 'popular' in relation to film, see Richard Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau, 'Introduction', in *Popular European Cinema*, ed. by Richard Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau (London; New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 1-14, but also Joanne Hollows and Mark Jancovich, 'Introduction: Popular Film and Cultural Distinctions', in *Approaches to Popular Film*, ed. by Joanne Hollows and Mark Jancovich (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 1-14.

<sup>56</sup> Unie filmových distributorů, *Přehledy, statistiky*, available at: <<https://www.ufd.cz/prehledy-statistiky>> [accessed 6 July 2020].

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Danielis, 'Česká filmová distribuce po roce 1989', p. 68.

<sup>59</sup> Darina Křivánková, 'Když do kina, tak na český film', *Lidové noviny*, 1 July 2005, p. 1.

According to this writer, 'The friendliness towards domestic films is a feature with which we stand in the same line with such film superpowers as France, or populous and incomparably more patriotically tuned Poland'.<sup>60</sup>

It is not my aim to compare how the popularity of Czech films in the Czech Republic stands next to national cinemas of other countries. However, it seems important to me to emphasise the popularity of Czech cinema in the domestic market. I will argue that it is indeed the idea of Czech cinema as welcoming to broad audiences that figured strongly in the promotion and reception of films analysed in this thesis. I will argue that the value of several films released in the 1990s was often negotiated in mainstream press in relation to ideas about Czech cinema traditions and broad audience appeal. However, while perceptions of Czech cinema as 'popular' reappear in many discourses analysed in this study, they are variously tied to notions of value, shifting from one group to another, as well as in time. In this sense it is therefore important to remember that the popular is not so much a fixed category with a stable meaning, nor a matter of textual qualities of specific films, but 'a site of struggle, a place, where conflicts between dominant and subordinate groups are played out and distinctions between the cultures of these groups are continuously constructed and reconstructed'.<sup>61</sup>

To explore the various ideas in which Czech cinema is constructed by different users, I will employ historical reception studies approach developed in the work of Barbara Klinger, Mark Jancovich and others. I will now outline the key arguments in this line of work and then I will further highlight the usefulness of this approach for the study of Czech cinema.

### Method: Debates in Reception Studies

As I indicated above, scholars employing reception studies work with the underlying assumption that a meaning of a film is not simply determined by its textual features but that there is a variety of contexts that figure and step into the meaning-construction process. Janet Staiger, who developed what she called the 'historical materialist' approach, argues throughout her work that the 'cultural artefacts are not containers with immanent meanings'

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Joanne Hollows and Mark Jancovich, 'Introduction: Popular Film and Cultural Distinctions', in *Approaches to Popular Film*, ed. by Joanne Hollows and Mark Jancovich (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 1-14 (p. 4).

since different audiences make different interpretations.<sup>62</sup> Importantly, reception studies emphasises that differences in interpretations need to be connected to the different contexts in which they are made. Staiger stresses 'that variations among interpretations have historical bases for their differences, and that differences and change are not idiosyncratic but due to social, political, and economic conditions, as well as to constructed identities such as gender, sexual preference, race, ethnicity, class and nationality'.<sup>63</sup> One of the aims of an analysis therefore becomes to connect interpretations to the conditions in which they are made, and 'attempt a historical explanation of the event of interpreting a text'.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, the aim of this thesis is to connect meanings and interpretations circulating around films to the different contexts and discourses that affected them.

Since reception studies rejects the idea of film as the central site determining its meaning, it refocuses attention from films themselves to the various discursive sites in which meanings and identities of film circulate; sites such as marketing materials, reviews, interviews and publicity stories. Together, these sites propose various 'meanings by which films can be framed' and form the environment in which audiences shape their understanding of films.<sup>65</sup> Throughout this thesis I will collectively allude to these texts that also form the primary data for this thesis as 'ancillary materials' – a term that I borrow from Martin Barker's essay in which he emphasises the importance of these texts for shaping audience reception.<sup>66</sup>

A very valuable intervention in the area of reception studies and analysis of ancillary materials was done by Barbara Klinger who analyses the different meanings circulating around films of Douglas Sirk in different periods and discursive sites. She repeats that the goal of such an analysis is to 'consider the contributions that contextual factors ... make to an understanding of how texts mean'.<sup>67</sup> To do this, she looks at a variety of ancillary texts – star publicity, marketing materials, reviews and academic texts. She approaches these materials as 'habitats of meaning' or 'systems of signification' and explores the different

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<sup>62</sup> Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. xi.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>65</sup> Martin Barker, 'News, Reviews, Clues, Interviews and Other Ancillary Materials – A Critique and Research Proposal', *Scope* (February 2004), p. 7, available at: <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/scope/documents/2004/february-2004/barker.pdf> [accessed 29 June 2020].

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>67</sup> Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture and the Films of Douglas Sirk* (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. xvi.

ways in which they interpret Sirk's films.<sup>68</sup> Importantly, Klinger looks at the ways meanings shift not only from one system of signification to another but also in different moments. Klinger also connects each of these meanings of Sirk's films to the historical conditions that affected them – the developments in academic methods, social values, or notions of quality circulating in review criticism. Sirk's films have therefore been variously labelled as adult films, soap operas, subversive films, classics or camp, each of these identities indicating various, often opposing meanings. Klinger's work therefore remains a very valuable source exploring how meanings of films shift and develop in different circumstances and over time.

Similar arguments about the multiplicity of meanings constructed around films were made by Thomas Austin in his book *Hollywood, Hype and Audiences: Selling and Watching Popular Film in the 1990s*. The value of Austin's work lies especially in the fact that he looks at how multiplicity of meanings is encouraged by the industry in promotional campaigns, with the aim of maximising audience for films. He approaches popular films as what he calls 'dispersible texts' that aim to provide different 'avenues of access' to different audiences.<sup>69</sup> The term is most obviously useful when applied to films which through tie-ins and cross-promotion make use of the various branches of large international conglomerates to maximise profit. However, Austin applies the term to a wider array of films in order to analyse the different meanings marketing campaigns strive to construct around films. A dispersible text, as he defines it, consists of a multitude of elements that are developed by 'fragmentation, elaboration and diffusion'.<sup>70</sup> These different avenues of access target different audiences that are divided into different 'knowable' groups and thus often encourage diverse interpretations that can be at odds with each other. Austin's perspective of popular films as being 'fragmented' into elements draws on Barbara Klinger's work on promotion in which she looks at how the production of film involves construction of its several 'consumable identities'. According to her, production of a film involves fragmenting the film into different segments 'with an inter-textual destiny'.<sup>71</sup> These different segments are then 're-narrativised' – developed during promotion via diverse sets of narratives – stories from the set, interviews and other stories.<sup>72</sup> For different audiences, meanings and pleasures of films can therefore be variously connected to a specific genre, or a star,

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Thomas Austin, *Hollywood, Hype and Audiences: Selling and Watching Popular Film in the 1990s* (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 29.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Barbara Klinger, 'Digressions at the Cinema: Reception and Mass Culture', *Cinema Journal*, 28.4 (1989), 3-19, p. 9.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. p. 14.

elements of the mise-en-scène, or a novel accompanying the release of the film. Importantly, however, Austin highlights that the different identities circulating around a single film do not strive to maintain a consistent set of meanings, but they are instead driven by the goal of broad dispersion. Ancillary materials will therefore often make somewhat contradictory claims. For example, he looks at the diverse connections and identities that were constructed in the promotional campaign of *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992) by highlighting 'generic, canonical and populist elements'.<sup>73</sup> Similarly, he analyses how *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1992) was in ancillary materials both connected to and distanced from the label of horror in order to target audiences of different tastes and preferences.<sup>74</sup> Austin's work is a reminder of the complexity of the network of meanings weaved around films and of the need to approach ancillary materials as texts full of competing interpretations.

To some extent, I will also draw on the work of Martin Barker, especially on his work on ancillary materials. Barker argues that ancillary materials need to be analysed as part of the 'flow of talk around film'. The flow of talk is a relatively broad inter-textual network of information and interpretations circulating around one film.<sup>75</sup> It can include interpretations shaped by face-to-face interactions but also information disseminated in publicity materials, interviews, press kits. He stresses especially the 'prefigurative' function of these texts, the ways in which they 'constitute more or less patterned discursive preparations for the act of viewing'.<sup>76</sup> In the approach Barker advocates, the different public debates and meanings circulating in ancillary materials help to form an overview of the environment in which different audiences variously construct their understanding of films. Barker's work (as well as Austin's), however, aims to reach beyond the analysis of ancillary materials and is interested in how audiences themselves construct their understanding of films. Through engagement with different audiences Barker addresses one of the limitations of the historical materialist approach, proponents of which can often only build arguments by stressing that ancillary materials do not provide access to meanings constructed by film audiences themselves. As Klinger emphasises, such an analysis 'does not provide a record of audience response' but helps to 'reconstruct the semiotic environment in which the text/viewer interaction took place, showing us discourses at work in the process of

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<sup>73</sup> Austin, *Hollywood, Hype and Audiences*, p. 50.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., pp. 114-133.

<sup>75</sup> Barker, 'News, Reviews, Clues, Interviews and Other Ancillary Materials'.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

reception'.<sup>77</sup> Barker's work is useful for this thesis mainly because it outlines several useful terms and approaches to studying ancillary materials, such the umbrella term 'ancillary materials' as well as the idea of 'flow of talk' as a patterned habitat of meanings. However, it needs to be stressed that this thesis aims to analyse the flow of talk around films only in its manifestations in ancillary materials. The data for this thesis does not constitute of interpretations constructed by audiences themselves, apart from film reviews, which, however, need to be approached as products of 'one particular *kind* of audience' (emphasis in original).<sup>78</sup>

As I described above, ancillary materials are full of competing interpretations. Importantly, these interpretations (or rather proponents of them) often struggle for dominance. Therefore, what reception studies often concerns itself with is what Pierre Bourdieu called the 'symbolic production' of films. As he says, this is 'the production of the value of the work or, which amounts to the same thing, of belief in the value of the work'.<sup>79</sup> In reception studies, special attention has been paid to reviews as 'gate-keepers or guardians of specific taste formations'<sup>80</sup> and the hierarchies of value they indicate to be at work in particular historical moments. As Bourdieu argued, however, differences in taste are bound to issues of power and authority. In fact, Bourdieu points out in his work that class differences are closely tied not only to unequal distribution of economic capital but also of cultural capital – sets of knowledge and skills which are acquired through education, upbringing and socialisation and which are mobilised in consumption and appreciation of cultural artefacts.<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, not only are these differences products of power relations, but are also used to reproduce and justify these power relations in return. Therefore, dominant groups will refer to their superior tastes to reaffirm their authority while subordinate tastes also define themselves in opposition to the legitimate taste. As Andy Willis points out 'taste formations are not simply produced out of the interests of a specific class or social group, but out of the struggles *between* classes and groups'.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning*, p. xx.

<sup>78</sup> Barker, 'News, Reviews, Clues, Interviews and Other Ancillary Materials', p. 3.

<sup>79</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. by Randal Johnson (Oxford: Polity Press, 1993), p. 37.

<sup>80</sup> Mark Jancovich, 'Genre and the Audience: Genre Classifications and Cultural Distinctions in the Mediation of *The Silence of the Lambs*', in *Hollywood Spectatorship: Changing Perceptions of Cinema Audiences*, ed. by Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby (London: British Film Institute, 2001), pp. 33-45 (p. 38).

<sup>81</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.), transl. by Richard Nice (London; New York: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>82</sup> Willis, 'Cultural Studies and Popular Film', p. 184.

While Bourdieu's theories approach the class-based taste formations as largely homogenous, others have extended his concepts into more nuanced analyses of film reception. Austin highlights that taste formations are not simply equated with specific class.<sup>83</sup> He stresses that a variety of cultural resources and practices play a part in shaping audiences' tastes, for example affiliations with specific fan communities or associations with political movements.<sup>84</sup> Mark Jancovich also stresses in his work the variety of values circulating in different publications and the taste formations they aim to address. In his work on *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991), for example, he looks at the diverse ways in which different groups define the generic identity of the film in relation to the category of 'horror'. As he points out, different publications address different audiences and therefore have different agendas and even 'employ wildly different notions of cinematic value'.<sup>85</sup> In the end, Jancovich argues that horror simply does not have a single meaning; different publications construct the generic identity of *The Silence of the Lambs* in 'competing ways as they seek to identify with or distance themselves from the term, and associate different texts with these constructions of horror'.<sup>86</sup> At the same time, the definitions of horror become part of different groups' struggles for authority 'as these groups compete for legitimacy of their definition in order to demonstrate the legitimacy of their claim to cultural authority'.<sup>87</sup> As a result, Jancovich argues that 'Examining a range of publications addressing a variety of readerships will reveal very different interests and preoccupations in any given film, and even clarify the context within which these publications are themselves meaningful as texts'.<sup>88</sup>

Indeed, the importance of analysing a variety of publications and the different notions of value they employ is underlined especially by the extent to which these struggles for authority can be glimpsed in discourses about Czech film criticism itself. A notion that has been rearticulated in Czech media for several decades now is that Czech criticism is in crisis. For instance, a common criticism is directed at the commercialisation or 'tabloidisation' of writing about film in mainstream press. These debates often establish the difference between the 'reviewer' (recenzent) and the 'critic' (kritik), with the former addressing an 'ordinary' reader while the latter offering a deeper analysis and evaluation of the film's qualities. These struggles for differentiation often rely on the common binary opposition of

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<sup>83</sup> Austin, *Hollywood, Hype and Audiences*, p. 20.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Jancovich, 'Genre and the Audience', p. 37.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 38

individual expression vs commerce. In the environment of Czech film criticism, the commercial interests of publications, it is argued, seem to push the critic into compromising their criteria and modes of evaluation. Instead of serving the criteria of artistic value, 'reviewers' are seen to serve the broad readership of their publications. This is for instance articulated in an interview broadcast as part of the programme *Konfrontace Petra Fischera* (ČT art 2014-2017). In an episode called 'The Critical State of Criticism' the host and film critic Peter Fischer interviews another critic, Darina Křivánková. One of the main points towards which Fischer returns in the discussion is the problem of 'serving the reader' that he sees as antithetical to the ideal form of criticism that serves the artwork itself.

In this line of argument, it is not only cinema itself that has been compromised by the transition to market economy but the institution of film criticism as well. In the introduction to Halada's book, Jan Lukeš says that 'The pull of the media towards entertainment, or even tabloid, pushed the critic not unfrequently into the role of mere advertising agent – and it needs to be said, many of them adjusted to it quite willingly'.<sup>89</sup> Similarly, Helena Bendová writing for *Cinepur* in an article titled 'Errors of Criticism' finds writing in mainstream publications to be mostly 'hidden advertisement' of films.<sup>90</sup> According to her it appears that 'critics from publications for "ordinary" spectators (from daily newspapers to monthly film magazines) have become victims of auto-censorship that imposes on them different than artistic criteria of evaluation and turns them in essence into promoters of values dictated by the film industry'.<sup>91</sup> Another critic, Zdeněk Holý, writing in the same issue of the magazine, also finds that texts published in daily newspapers and popular magazines are 'the extended arm of the market, builders of the tastes of their audiences'.<sup>92</sup> I perceive these attempts to police the boundaries between 'mainstream' and 'serious' criticism to be functioning similarly to the different definitions of horror Jancovich analyses in his work. Critics define the role and boundaries of criticism in different ways as they struggle to distance themselves from lower forms and therefore establish their own authority.

My interest in this idea of crisis of criticism therefore lies mainly in the struggles of different groups for authority that it reveals. It needs to be pointed out, however, that

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<sup>89</sup> Jan Lukeš in Halada, *Český film devadesátých let*, p. 10.

<sup>90</sup> Helena Bendová, 'Omyly kritiky', *Cinepur*, 31 (2003), available at <<http://cinepur.cz/article.php?article=56>> [accessed 1 July 2020].

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Zdeněk Holý, 'Mystická louže', *Cinepur*, 31 (2003), available at <<http://cinepur.cz/article.php?article=580>> [accessed 1 July 2020].



questions of quality and standards of Czech criticism are not necessarily always targeted at the mainstream side of criticism. It is often argued that 'serious' evaluations of cinema are also lacking (for instance in Bendová and Holý). Quite often participants in these debates question whether criticism even exists in the ideal form in the Czech Republic. 'Criticism' in these debates therefore often represents a sort of utopic ideal towards which cinematic writers should strive but which does not exist in Czech media. More importantly for this thesis, following the work of Jancovich and Klinger and others, I approach the different publications as addressing audiences of different tastes and therefore exercising different notions of value, instead of seeing one or the other as inherently more or less valid evaluative criteria.

At the same time, however, it is also my aim to question some of the unspoken assumptions the more 'serious' taste formations often rely on in their claims to superiority. For example, it is interesting in the examples above that Holý (and Fischer implicitly) seems to find more specialised publications outside the mainstream press to be excluded from the process of taste building, of 'serving the reader'. There is a tendency to overlook the extent to which these publications and texts also address their own audiences (no matter how niche this audience is), since any act of such writing assumes that 'someone' will read them (this thesis included). Similarly, occasionally I argue that some phenomena have been marginalised in 'serious' considerations because of the dominance of certain notions of value and relevance in the types of writing with such aspirations. This is especially the case in the second chapter on the reception of *Cosy Dens* (Pelíšky; Jan Hřebejk 1999), in which I look at the family film as a category that is recognised in the industry discourse and mainstream criticism but has attracted little academic attention. It seems to me that it is the reliance on a limited set of interests and justifications in claims to authority, and the simplicity with which certain ideas of 'lower' forms are rejected in these claims, that is also behind the lack of academic work on contemporary Czech cinema.

To summarise, this thesis sets out to investigate the different meanings circulating around films released in the Czech Republic after the fall of communism in 1989. It adopts the historical reception studies method and in doing so it aims to explore the different interpretations constructed in different discursive sites. It explores not only how meanings and notions of value shift from one habitat of meaning to another, but also how they develop in time. This includes not only looking at the shifting position of specific films in relation to ideas of value, but also the development of specific ideas about what Czech cinema should

be. In this regard, I will also consider the different industrial and socio-historical contexts that underlie different interpretations and notions of value.

## Finding Data

This thesis initially arose from my interest in analysing the ways in which films interact with the process of coming to term with the past, specifically the communist past. Although the focus of the thesis has since then shifted, it affected considerably the case studies chosen for the thesis. While the thesis still explores how critics approach the issue of historical representation to some extent, it currently focuses more on the discursive category of Czech cinema as defined above. As a result of the initial intentions of the research, however, eleven films were initially chosen for the purpose of this thesis, the majority of which are set during the communist regime: *Tank Battalion* (*Tankový prapor*; Vít Olmer, 1991), *Kolya* (*Kolja*; Jan Svěrák, 1996), *The Wonderful Years That Sucked* (*Báječná léta pod psa*; Petr Nikolaev, 1997) *Cosy Dens*, *Pupendo* (Jan Hřebejk, 2003), *It's Gonna Get Worse (...a bude hůř*; Petr Nikolaev, 2007), *Walking Too Fast* (*Pouta*; Radim Špaček, 2009), *Kawasaki's Rose* (*Kawasakiho růže*; Jan Hřebejk, 2009), *Identity Card* (*Občanský průkaz*; Ondřej Trojan, 2010), *In the Shadow* (*Ve stínu*; David Ondříček, 2012) and *Burning Bush* (*Hořící keř*; Agnieszka Holland, 2013). Due to the limited amount of thematic concerns the films chosen represent, as well as the very small sample out of the whole corpus of Czech films produced during the period that I will explore, it needs to be stressed that this thesis does not claim to analyse or reveal an extensive variety of positions towards post-communist Czech cinema.

As I have already indicated, the aim was to analyse meanings appearing in a diverse spectrum of publications. The ancillary materials collected for the thesis therefore appeared in daily newspapers *Mladá Fronta Dnes*, *Lidové noviny*, *Právo*, *Hospodářské noviny*, weekly magazines *Týden*, *Reflex*, *Respekt*, *Instinkt*, monthly magazines *Cinema*, *Premier*, *Literární noviny*, *Cinepur*, critical quarterlies *Revolver Revue* and *Film a doba* as well as internet portals *Aktuálně.cz*, *MovieZone*. These publications and portals vary quite considerably in their target audiences, from mainstream newspapers *Mladá Fronta Dnes* and *Lidové noviny*, to publications aiming to represent the quality side of press (for example *Respekt*), and publications focusing on more specialised cultural criticism (*Literární noviny*, *Cinepur*, *Revolver Revue*). Following the proponents of the historical materialist approach, I searched for different kinds of texts – interviews, gossips, previews, reviews, posters, images, press kits and others. I decided to focus especially on printed and online materials which were

easier to locate on the internet or in archives and libraries rather than audiovisual materials broadcast on television or radio. Furthermore, I made the decision to exclude evaluations and comments from the internet portal *Czecho-Slovak Film Database (ČSFD)* from the analysis. ČSFD is in concept similar to the *Internet Movie Database*; it allows registered users to rate and 'review' films in short comments. While the inclusion of these comments can be justified on the premise that, as Jancovich argues, any act of criticism is a claim 'to participate in the process by which cultural value is defined and distinguished',<sup>93</sup> I did not include this data for several reasons. The first one is simply practical – the data would be much larger. Secondly, several films analysed in this thesis were released before ČSFD was founded in 2001 and therefore the nature of these comments as retrospective would have to be taken into account. Furthermore, it is difficult to determine the timeframe in which the comments on the portal were made. The date of the original comment is provided but comments and ratings can be edited. It seems that they are more usefully regarded as part of the flow of talk and variety of meanings circulating at the specific moment in which they are read. Therefore, they are more suitable for an analysis of 'synchronic' differences in interpretations rather than 'diachronic' developments that this thesis is also interested in.<sup>94</sup>

To locate the data, I searched the chosen film titles and publication titles in the online search tools of the National Library of the Czech Republic as well as different libraries located in the UK. As a result, I accessed digitised versions of articles from *Lidové noviny* and *Mladá fronta Dnes* available at the Cambridge University Library. The School of Slavonic and East European Studies at UCL stored the printed versions of older issues of the same newspapers as well as magazines such as *Respekt* and *Revolver Revue*. Remaining data was gathered in the National Library in Prague. Around 80 texts were collected for each film. However, due to the large amount of meanings and materials circulating around a single film in different media, an analysis of them needs to be selective. As Barker points out, facing such an amount of data can lead to chaos rather than a clear and focused analysis. One of the tasks of making sense of such an array of data is to identify patterns and the 'discursive terrain' these materials construct – to what extent 'they are patterned, drawing on the same sources, and using the same range of concepts, questions, and judgements'.<sup>95</sup> These materials were therefore subsequently coded in a search for such patterns. This analysis

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<sup>93</sup> Jancovich, 'Genre and the Audience', p. 37.

<sup>94</sup> Barbara Klinger, 'Film History Terminable and Interminable: Recovering the Past in Reception Studies', *Screen*, 38.2 (1997), 107-128.

<sup>95</sup> Barker, 'News, Reviews, Clues, Interviews and Other Ancillary Materials', p. 8.

therefore again needs to acknowledge its partiality rather than claim to explore the full scope of the different meanings in circulation around films in specific times.

Due to the amount of data collected, and the fascinating discourses they reveal, out of the original eleven films only four case studies are included in this thesis: *Kolya*, *Cosy Dens*, *Walking Too Fast*, and *Identity Card*. These films were released in the span of almost fourteen years (1996, 1999, 2009 and 2010, respectively). Each chapter is dedicated primarily to one film, its promotion and reception around the time of release. However, the discursive terrains constructed around these films are also compared in the course of the thesis to explore the films' shifting positions in hierarchies of value as well as the changes and developments in evaluative and interpretative strategies appearing in their ancillary materials. Each chapter also separates analysis of promotion and reception to take into consideration the different aims these materials were produced for. Furthermore, despite the often exclusive emphasis on ancillary materials scholars such as Klinger place, I will occasionally look at the content of films themselves. As several scholars have argued, it is not the case that contexts simply determine the meanings constructed. Instead the construction of meaning is a process in which the reader, the film, a variety of contexts, as well as 'operations of power' interact.<sup>96</sup> In some limited cases I therefore go beyond the ancillary materials to the films to better clarify 'what might be facilitating the reading' under analysis.<sup>97</sup> The aim is not, however, to invalidate any specific interpretations, instead to better explain the terrain in which they were made.

### Czech Retro Film and the Middlebrow

As I indicated above, in the initial stages of the research the intention was to look at the ways film criticism defines 'acceptable' ways of historical representation and therefore also how it interacts with the process of 'coming to terms with the communist past'. In line with the historical materialist approach, it was to analyse the shifting and developing evaluations of historical representations in films released from the fall of the communist regime in 1989 until 2013. Similar approach to the one originally intended for this thesis was in fact adopted by Karina Hoření in a chapter on the reception of films set during communism. She identifies 'repression and conflict with the regime' as the key theme in these films, or rather a theme

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<sup>96</sup> Austin, *Hollywood, Hype and Audiences*, p. 2.

<sup>97</sup> Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (New York; London: New York University Press, 2000), p. 163.

that 'critics seek', but she does not aim to connect these readings to the socio-historical contexts in which they were made.<sup>98</sup> Therefore, while originally setting out to analyse the reception of films released between 1989 and 2012, she merely admits that films made in the nineties were not commonly interpreted around this theme, without trying to explain this absence.<sup>99</sup> In the third chapter I will in fact argue that 'coming to terms with the communist past' is a theme that rose to prominence in evaluative strategies of mainstream critics in 2000s due to several reasons, especially the growing debates about the dangers of 'nostalgia' for communism.

Furthermore, it has increasingly become the case that if post-communist Czech cinema attracts any academic attention, it is usually the films representing the different national pasts that are analysed. They have been analysed, for example, to some extent in the series *Film and History* co-published by the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes. A few chapters on post-communist historical film appeared in the anthology *Film a dějiny 4: Normalizace*,<sup>100</sup> and a whole separate collection in the series was dedicated to them later in *Film a dějiny 6*.<sup>101</sup> Some attention to these films was also paid in Ewa Mazierska's book *European Cinema and Intertextuality*,<sup>102</sup> and recently also in Luboš Ptáček's monograph *Umění mezi alegorií a ideologií [Art Between Allegory and Ideology]*.<sup>103</sup> Similarly, Veronika Pehe has recently analysed them in her book as part of the post-communist 'memory cultures' in the Czech Republic.<sup>104</sup> The growing interest in representations of past in Czech film is definitely an interesting phenomenon in itself. On the other hand, this narrow focus on 'films on the past' in this thesis and in other academic literature remains one of the limitations of existing work on post-communist Czech cinema, and is an incentive for further research that needs to look at a broader array of films from Czech post-communist cinema.

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<sup>98</sup> Karina Hoření, "Žádná sladkobolná selanka". Psaní o normalizačních filmech', in *Film a dějiny 4: Normalizace*, ed. by Petr Kopal (Prague: Casablanca, 2014), pp. 538-555 (p. 548).

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Peter Kopal (ed.), *Film a dějiny 4: Normalizace* (Prague: Casablanca, 2014).

<sup>101</sup> Luboš Ptáček and Petr Kopal (eds.), *Film a dějiny 6. - Postkomunismus: Proměny českého historického filmu po roce 1989* (Prague: Casablanca, 2017)

<sup>102</sup> Ewa Mazierska, *European Cinema and Intertextuality: History, Memory and Politics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

<sup>103</sup> Luboš Ptáček, *Umění mezi alegorií a ideologií: Proměna reprezentace historie v českém historickém filmu a televizním seriálu* (Prague: Casablanca, 2019).

<sup>104</sup> Veronika Pehe, *Velvet Retro: Postsocialist Nostalgia and the Politics of Heroism in Czech Popular Culture* (New York; Oxford: Berghahn, 2020).

All films analysed in this thesis have been labelled as 'retro films' by some writers in ancillary materials.<sup>105</sup> While this label indicates the film's setting in the past, there is, to my knowledge no research on the use of this generic label in Czech context and how it interacts or is defined against other genres, especially the 'historical film'. Indeed, some above mentioned publications write about these films as 'historical films'. However, as this thesis shows, this is a label that the films were intentionally avoiding to some extent in promotional campaigns. In my data the label of retro also strongly intersects with what has been called the 'pretty Czech' ('hezký český') style. While the term 'pretty Czech' was originally applied to Jan Svěrák's film *The Elementary School* (*Obecná škola*; 1991), which was promoted with the tagline 'pretty, Czech, cheerful, sound, inflammable', it has been applied more broadly to describe the style of films like *Kolya*, *Cosy Dens* and others, that through their reliance on a mix of humour and drama offer conciliatory storylines for broad audiences. The terms 'retro film' as well as 'the pretty Czech' therefore need to be understood as cultural categories with shifting meanings and competing definitions that are, furthermore, intertwined with struggles for distinctions.

An important point about the retro film, and historical representation on film in general, is that in the area of filmmaking it is often tied to claims to relevance, and cultural value. In other words, it tends to represent the 'quality' branch of filmmaking. Indeed, such claims to quality appear in ancillary materials of all films analysed. At the same time, as I mentioned above, they often also make attempts to distance themselves from the elitist and 'serious' connotations the term 'history' has. As such, they all can be perceived as representing what has been called middlebrow cinema. In a similar vein, Francesco Pitassio refers to *Kolya* and *Cosy Dens* as 'popular art-house productions', which blend 'the search for a wide audience with the reference to established national aesthetic, political and moral values'.<sup>106</sup> It seems to me, however, that the term 'art-house' suggests forms of circulation and distribution that would simply not apply to these films in the Czech Republic. I therefore prefer to use the term middlebrow instead.

The 'middlebrow' can have a broad range of meanings. Quite often it tends to be associated with social mobility and class aspirations of audiences.<sup>107</sup> It is therefore not only

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<sup>105</sup> This also includes *Kolya* which got the label despite the fact that the film is set only seven years before it's release date.

<sup>106</sup> Pitassio, 'Popular Nostalgia', p. 219.

<sup>107</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction*, pp. 321-328. See also Lawrence Napper, *British Cinema and Middlebrow Culture in the Interwar Years* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2009).

used to describe texts, but also tastes, audiences and institutions.<sup>108</sup> Despite the aspirations to legitimacy middlebrow cinema often shows, it is also connected to ideas of accessibility and broad appeal and can therefore be treated as part of the 'popular'. This is the stance I will be adopting in the first two chapters of this thesis, in order to highlight the extent to which the film's value is negotiated in mainstream criticism in relation to ideas of broad audience appeal. However, as Sally Faulkner argues, middlebrow cinema is cinema that is 'always in a process of self-affirmation' against the extremes of 'high' and 'low' culture.<sup>109</sup> On these grounds, she suggests to treat the middlebrow as a category separate from the popular.<sup>110</sup> Separating the middlebrow from lower and higher forms becomes especially important in the last two chapters of this thesis as the concept becomes useful to explain shifting notions of value, as well as the positions assumed by critics towards certain forms of Czech cinema.

## Chapter Outline

The first chapter explores the negotiation of the idea of national traditions in promotion and reception of an international co-production – *Kolya*. In this chapter I look at how the co-production status affected the interpretative frameworks circulating in ancillary materials and what perceptions and ideas of Czech cinema they construct. I argue that the film's promotion and reception especially centre on the scriptwriter and actor Zdeněk Svěrák to locate the film's Czechness. As will become clear, discourses about Svěrák's writing style – the humour, kindness and compassion with which he is seen to approach his characters blend into descriptions of his personality, but are also presented as particularly Czech. In turn, these characteristics also present the basis for the evaluative strategies critics applied to the film. I subsequently analyse the debates about the film's value in relation to Mette Hjort's concept of 'politics of recognition', which considers how discourses about national ownership of films are also intertwined with goals and hopes of seeing national culture recognised abroad.<sup>111</sup> In this regard, I analyse the interpretations made in ancillary materials that debate to what extent the 'Czechness' of the film was appropriated for international

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<sup>108</sup> Sally Faulkner, 'Introduction. Approaching the Middlebrow: Audience; Text; Institution', in *Middlebrow Cinema*, ed. by Sally Faulkner (London; New York: Routledge, 2016) pp. 1-12.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6-8.

<sup>111</sup> Mette Hjort, 'Danish Cinema and the Politics of Recognition', in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, ed. by David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), pp. 520-532.

audiences. I analyse the struggles between different taste formations in these debates and argue that they reveal hopes about international recognition of censorship-free national cinema, but also express concerns about the quality of Czech productions.

In the second chapter I move on to analyse the promotion and reception of *Cosy Dens*. The primary argument in this chapter is that the promotion and reception in mainstream press build ideas of value using similar terms to those that were present in the flow of talk around *Kolya*. In this chapter, I specifically argue that the film and ideas of quality circulating around the retro film in mainstream press are constructed around ideas of escapism and pleasures for family audiences. This chapter therefore agrees with Francesco Pitassio's point that *Kolya* and *Cosy Dens*'s claims to prestige partly draw on 'cultural and cinematic heritage that is rooted in popular audiovisual consumption'.<sup>112</sup> The phenomenon of films targeting family audiences has rarely attracted attention in academic works on Czech cinema. The aim of this chapter is therefore also meant to be an encouragement for potential further explorations of the shapes of the family film in Czech cinema. I first look at the film's promotion to highlight the campaign's focus on attracting cross-generational audiences. Then I analyse the evaluative strategies employed in mainstream criticism. I argue that critics evaluate the film around notions of Czech comedy traditions, emphasising the film's elements of humour and drama as well as nostalgic remembering of childhood. The analysis shows that several critics aim to establish the value of *Cosy Dens* by framing it as an opportunity to 'contemplate one's place in familial networks, past and present'.<sup>113</sup> I then move on to analyse opinions expressed in 'serious' publications and look at the different notions of value they employ. I observe that critics aiming to distinguish themselves from mainstream criticism rarely tend to go beyond dismissing popular pleasures as an influence of the old communist ideology. The chapter therefore suggests that it is also the reliance on this dismissal of the popular in claims to authority that lies behind the exclusion of the family film in histories of Czech cinema.

The next chapter focuses on a film that was released more than ten years after *Cosy Dens* – *Identity Card*. While *Identity Card* is repeatedly presented in ancillary materials as a similar type of film, the interpretations that circulate in the ancillary materials of these two films are quite different. This chapter therefore aims to explain the reasons for this shift. I

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<sup>112</sup> Pitassio, 'Popular Nostalgia', p. 221.

<sup>113</sup> Peter Krämer, 'Would You Take Your Child to See This Film? The Cultural and Social Work of the Family-Adventure Movie', in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, Steve Neale and Murray Smith (London; New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 294-311 (p. 305).



place it in the context of debates and concerns over 'nostalgia for communism' that is seen to be perpetuated by popular media (and especially television in the ancillary materials analysed). I will argue that post-communist nostalgia is a topical reference that filmmakers respond to in aspirations to prestige and critics adopt it in their claims to cultural authority. The emphasis therefore remains on how identities of films constructed in ancillary materials "piggyback" on developments in popular culture and society more broadly'.<sup>114</sup> However, this chapter not only observes the adoption of topical references in ancillary materials, but also shifting notions of value. While mainstream critics often validated the comforting pleasures of *Kolya* and *Cosy Dens*, in ancillary materials of *Identity Card* these values are presented as outdated. I will therefore also analyse this difference in evaluative strategies as a shift in perceptions about the nature and role of Czech retro film. As I will argue, this role is constructed in *Identity Card*'s ancillary materials in opposition to the 'popular'.

This idea is further developed in the final chapter that looks at the promotion and reception of *Walking Too Fast*. In this chapter I note that the film's ancillary materials construct several identities for the film and I especially focus on the film's identity as a genre film and a 'smart' film. The main argument of the chapter is that these identities are employed in ancillary materials in order to differentiate the film from the 'mainstream' Czech film. I look at several constructs of the mainstream circulating in media discourses. As I argue, different taste formations employ these ideas of Czech mainstream as 'negative benchmarks' in their evaluations of the film and the state of Czech cinema in general.<sup>115</sup> I show that these negative benchmarks are on the one hand represented by unsophisticated low comedies. However, in other cases they are presented as middlebrow conciliatory generic hybrids that with the goal of appealing to broad audiences combine elements of comedy and drama. I also connect these constructions of Czech mainstreams to the notions of value they imply. With the mainstream being defined as appealing to broad audiences, generically unfocused, not overly sophisticated and rather 'Czech', critics also demonstrate their preferences for different types of cinema, especially foreign genre films and the festival film. I will return to summarise the implications of these canons for further study of Czech cinema in the conclusions of this thesis.

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<sup>114</sup> Austin, *Hollywood, Hype and Audiences*, p. 50.

<sup>115</sup> Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning*, p. 94.

### Note on Translations

Apart from English film titles, all translations from Czech in this thesis are mine. Since this thesis aims to analyse the language and choice of words used in original texts, it was important to me that some elements in translated quotes, such as syntax, remain close to the original. However, in some cases minor adjustments were made to maintain some level of fluency so that these texts are comprehensible in English. These adjustments were always done with the aim to alter the message of the original text as little as possible.

## Chapter 1: Negotiating ‘the National’ in *Kolya*

*Kolya* is, according to many critics, the most successful Czech post-revolution film. It won an Oscar for the Best Foreign Language Film in 1997 and after its release it became an important reference in debates about what Czech cinema could or should be like after the fall of the Iron Curtain. In this chapter I analyse *Kolya*’s ‘reception trajectory’ – a process in which the talk about film develops as different discourses and interpretative strategies join the flow of talk in different attempts to make sense of the film.<sup>116</sup> The trajectory I focus on in this chapter reaches from before the film’s release until the film’s success at the Academy Awards ceremony. In this timespan, the film’s value was negotiated and contested mainly along a set of two references – the ‘truthfulness’ of the Czechness it represents, and the importance of international recognition for Czech cinema. I adopt especially Mette Hjort’s concept of politics of recognition to analyse the hopes and concerns about Czech cinema these debates reveal.

For the purposes of this chapter existing work on heritage cinema will be useful to some extent. The term heritage cinema, while originally associated especially with British costume dramas, has since been applied to films depicting the pasts of other nations. As a result, Belén Vidal wonders whether ‘The heritage film from the mid-1990s onwards should thus be considered instead as a fully-fledged international genre, based on iconographic conventions that can be creatively appropriated and re-encoded according to changing notions of realism, authenticity and ideological purpose in order to address diverse audiences’.<sup>117</sup> However, while I do engage with some points raised in works on heritage cinema, it is not my aim to focus on *Kolya*’s stylistic elements in order to argue for its inclusion in an international corpus of the heritage film. As Tim Bergfelder has pointed out, the heritage label has been used very freely since its inception, quite often more as a synonym to ‘period film’.<sup>118</sup> As he says, ‘if used too broadly, ... the term leads to arbitrariness rather than clarification. Often, what is meant by “heritage” refers less to the films’ relationship to a particular historical legacy (national or otherwise) and denotes more a type of “quality” or

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<sup>116</sup> Ernest Mathijs, ‘Bad Reputations: The Reception of “Trash” Cinema’, *Screen*, 46.4 (2005), 451-472, p. 462.

<sup>117</sup> Belén Vidal, *Heritage Film: Nation, Genre and Representation* (London; New York: Wallflower, 2012), p. 74.

<sup>118</sup> Tim Bergfelder, ‘Popular European Cinema in the 2000s: Cinephilia, Genre and Heritage,’ in *The Europeanness of European Cinema: Identity, Meaning, Globalization*, ed. by Mary Harrod, Mariana Liz and Alissa Timoshkina (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015), pp. 33-58.

“prestige” production’.<sup>119</sup> Indeed, ideas about prestige and quality both come into play in the flow of talk around *Kolya* and it is also for this reason works on heritage cinema are useful for my arguments here. However, in the case of *Kolya*, some ideas about heritage, especially cinema traditions, have an important place in the interpretative frameworks employed in ancillary materials and the subsequent debates about the film’s value. It is therefore a rather limited notion of heritage I consider in this chapter. The ‘heritage’ of the heritage film on the one hand usually refers to the period the film represents that, the ancillary materials often tell the audiences, has particular (inter)national significance. At the same time, these works often have connections to another heritage – that of literary canons – since they are frequently adaptations of classic literature. Furthermore, Andrew Higson highlights heritage cinema’s connections to the heritage industry.<sup>120</sup> The heritage in my chapter is instead a cluster of myths and ideas about national traditions and Czechness mobilised in the flow of talk as a form of resistance to several contexts perceived to be threatening the national cinema.

The main point that makes debates about heritage cinema relevant to this chapter is therefore the fact that these prestige productions are intertwined with ideas about national identity, and the ways national identity is presented outside the nation. Indeed, the flow of talk around *Kolya* is heavily concerned with the film’s Czechness. One critic writing his review a few months after the premiere notes that ‘*Kolya* has ... become more than just a *film* event: we can gauge from some critical writings as well as audience reactions that this work is perceived also as an important accomplishment on the *national* field’ (emphasis in original).<sup>121</sup> A prominent interpretation appearing in reviews not only sees the film as drawing on Czech cinema traditions; the film’s elements of kind humour, irony and tragedy are commonly found to be demonstrating and speaking to many national characteristics too. Despite the fact that the film was co-financed from French, British and Czech sources, there was never a doubt that this was primarily a Czech film. However, it is not the case that these ideas of Czechness were always unproblematically accepted. Instead, the authenticity and sincerity of the presented Czechness became what Martin Barker, Jane Arthurs and

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>120</sup> Andrew Higson, *English Heritage, English Cinema: Costume Drama Since 1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>121</sup> Ondřej Štindl, ‘Všude tam, kde je krásně čechoučko’, *Kritická příloha Revolver Revue*, 6 (1996), 131-135, p. 131.

Ramaswami Harindranath have called a 'terrain of debate' – an agreement over topics that need to be debated and around which notions of the film's value were negotiated.<sup>122</sup>

As Higson points out, in a globalised environment claims fervently trying to assert a film's national identity are often 'a question of promotion, a means of forging a brand name, an assertion of difference from Hollywood' and are quite often signs of anxieties 'about national identity and national status'.<sup>123</sup> Indeed, there are several anxieties I reveal as underlying the flow of talk in the course of this chapter. It is my argument that the flow of talk was heavily influenced by concerns about the state of national cinema, which was not fulfilling the hopes of freedom and revived quality initially appearing after the fall of communism. As Peter Hames points out on this topic, '[t]he removal of Communist censorship would, it was hoped, lead to something like a return to the conditions of the 1960s New Wave, in which filmmakers, free of political constraint, would be able to create relevant films in a free and open manner'.<sup>124</sup> However, what the removal of state-controlled quota also allowed was an influx of a large number of Hollywood productions. Before the revolution the amount of films from 'nonsocialist' countries released in Czech cinemas was regulated and could not constitute more than thirty per cent of all films released in the country every year.<sup>125</sup> While at the end of the 1980s only five per cent of all films released in Czechoslovakia were American, this number rose to 77 per cent in 1993.<sup>126</sup> Throughout most of the 1990s about two thirds of all distributed films were classified as American.<sup>127</sup> Furthermore, due to rapidly diminished funds and state support for the national cinema, the number of films produced also declined. While during the planned economy the country produced between 40 and 45 films a year, these numbers have never been met in the post-communist market conditions. In 1992 only 6 Czech films were released, and pessimistic critics were of the opinion that commerce would eventually kill Czech cinema.<sup>128</sup> At the same time, the existing Czech films made in the world of commerce were not meeting the quality standards expected and hoped for by many critics.

This was the environment in which *Kolya* was released and which strongly informed its promotional strategies and critical reception. In the first part of this chapter I will look at

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<sup>122</sup> Martin Barker, Jane Arthurs and Ramaswami Harindranath, *The Crash Controversy: Censorship Campaigns and Film Reception* (London; New York: Wallflower, 2001), p. 12.

<sup>123</sup> Higson, *English Heritage, English Cinema*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>124</sup> Hames, 'The Czech and Slovak Republics: Velvet Revolution and After', p. 43.

<sup>125</sup> Danielis, 'Česká filmová distribuce po roce 1989', p. 57.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 68-9.

the film's promotion and the attempts to define the film as a particularly Czech product. I will focus especially on two elements – explicit distinction of the film from Hollywood productions and the reputation and image of the scriptwriter Zdeněk Svěrák. First, I look at several elements and terms highlighted in the promotional campaign. Due to the limited space, I look especially at those identities that gained particular prominence in ancillary materials, especially those aiming to construct *Kolya* as a 'moving film'. I analyse articles, the poster and the Czech trailer to look at the ways in which this identity was reinforced in different forms. I then analyse how that the film's 'moving' and emotional qualities were highlighted in the promotional campaign to distinguish it from the action films seemingly dominating Czech cinemas. Furthermore, as we will see, the terms associated with Svěrák's image as a renowned author working in the best traditions of Czech comedy were adopted by critics as the primary interpretative framework of *Kolya*. While Svěrák's son Jan directed the film, it was usually the writer's 'handwriting', characterised by humanist and kind humour with touches of irony, that were seen as the primary source of the film's Czech qualities and excellence. The film, many critics claim, returned quality to Czech cinema in an age of mediocrity.

Although *Kolya* was on the one hand meant to be a quintessentially Czech product, it was also discussed in ancillary materials as a quality internationally appealing piece of cinema. The film's universal appeal was seemingly confirmed by its recognition at international film festivals and awards ceremonies, most prominently the Oscar for a Foreign Language Film. In the second part I therefore move onto exploring the debates about the film's status as a representative of national cinema on the international field. As Thomas Elsaesser points out, festival circuits are important places for the acquisition of cultural capital. As he puts it, 'one of the key functions of the international festival [is] to categorize, classify, sort and sift the world's annual film production' but instead of doing so through market rules, festivals aim to give the impression of 'supporting, selecting, celebrating and rewarding – in short, by adding value and cultural capital'.<sup>129</sup> The cultural capital of festivals and awards can therefore form one potential barometer of what Mette Hjort has called 'politics of recognition' – 'a desire to see expressions of culturally inflected identities recognised as valuable both internally and externally'.<sup>130</sup> While Hjort finds the politics of recognition to be an ambition driving the state support of Danish cinema throughout the

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<sup>129</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), p. 96.

<sup>130</sup> Mette Hjort, 'Denmark', in *The Cinema of Small Nations*, ed. by Mette Hjort and Duncan Petrie (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp. 23-42 (p. 25).

1970s and 1980s, we can notice hopes of recognition as an underlying discourse in *Kolya*'s flow of talk too. I will argue that attempts to appeal to many publics introduce in the flow of talk concerns about the authenticity of *Kolya*'s Czechness. However, the film's international recognition and the cultural capital gained on the international award circuit seemingly becomes the ultimate counterargument for the defenders of the film. This reception trajectory reveals the strength of hopes for recognition in the flow of talk and, as will become clearer in the following chapter, reaffirmed the terms used to evaluate Czech films for several years.

### Opposing Hollywood in Promotion

*Kolya* tells the story of two people meeting under unconventional circumstances and developing a strong friendship shortly before the fall of communism in 1989. Louka (Zdeněk Svěrák), a talented musician is condemned to playing only at funerals because his reckless jokes had displeased the state officials and cost him his job at the Czech Philharmonic. He tries to earn extra money where he can, so he can finally buy his own car. One day he therefore agrees to be a part of an arranged marriage with a Russian woman (Irina Bezrukova) who wishes to emigrate from the Soviet Union. However, Louka unexpectedly ends up having to look after her little son Kolya (Andrej Chalimon) by himself. In the rest of the film, the two gradually learn to understand and live together, despite their differences and Louka's dislike of children. They develop a close bond by the end of the film, but little Kolya is eventually returned to his mother and leaves the country with her.

As Barbara Klinger has pointed out, 'production of a film ... includes the making of its 'consumable identities' – developing different elements of the film 'into a premediated network of advertising and promotion that will enter the social sphere of reception'.<sup>131</sup> One such consumable identity that was granted a prominent place in the promotional campaign, in articles, as well as the Czech trailer, introduced *Kolya* as a 'moving film'. Several elements from the film were used to reinforce this identity – from plot elements, to the imagery chosen for the poster and trailer. For instance, some ancillary materials focused on the warm relationship developing in the narrative between the two central characters. The poster consists merely of a close-up of Louka's smiling face, his eyes covered by small child's hands. This image focuses on the playfulness and trust between the two characters and does not

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<sup>131</sup> Barbara Klinger, 'Digressions at the Cinema: Reception and Mass Culture', *Cinema Journal*, 28.4 (1989), 3-19, p. 9.

indicate the journeys they both first undertake to get to that point. Similarly, the trailer, especially its second half, shows several similar warm moments between the two protagonists; we see Louka telling a story to Kolya in bed and little Kolya repeating it back in Russian. Subsequent shots show them smiling while cycling together in a sun-drenched countryside, and little Kolya jumping onto Louka's lap and wrapping his arms around his neck. The whole second half of the trailer is also accompanied by intensifying string music, further underscoring the film's warm emotions. Whether the two characters were going to warm up to each was never a secret in the ancillary materials.

Another element lifted from the film to emphasise the film's 'movingness' was the child character, Kolya, himself. This is not quite surprising, since the film carries his name. However, his place in the campaign is different from Louka's. The promotional campaign quite often depicts Louka as a developing character. The trailer, for example, indicates that Louka undergoes changes in attitudes during the course of the film. The first part of the trailer shows his reluctant agreement to participate in the arranged marriage, it shows his unwillingness to speak Russian, unhappiness about having to look after little Kolya. The audience sees him unmoved by little Kolya's tears as the child stands sulking in his flat, not understanding what Louka is saying. As mentioned above, his coldness quickly disappears in the second part of the trailer, indicating that he develops from this unwilling guardian to a caring father figure. In contrast to the journey Louka is shown to have, ancillary materials do not spend a lot of time describing Kolya's character arc, however. This is undoubtedly partly because Louka was seen by producers as a more typical point of identification for the audiences. On the other hand, Kolya's primary role in the campaign seems to be his 'child cuteness'. To underline this focus, the trailer for instance chooses to show several disjointed shots of Kolya without providing a lot of context. We see close ups of his smiling face drenched in sunlight, or him kissing a marionette. In other shots he stands uncomfortably in an overcrowded public space and is comically trapped in the doors of the city metro. These disjointed images of Kolya indicate that the titular character is to serve as a set of visual attractions (and aural to a lesser extent, with his occasional, soft, Russian voice) helping to cement the film's identity as a moving film.

This aim to construct one of the film's consumable identities as a moving film is also explicitly expressed in a voice-over provided by the star Zdeněk Svěrák himself. In the closing seconds of the trailer he exclaims in a calm voice, 'Yes, it is a moving film, we're not going to deny that, but there's also fun in it', as if he is merely confirming to the audiences what they should have already guessed from the trailer by now. Other ancillary materials released



before the film's release similarly did not shy away from bringing attention to *Kolja's* emotional charge. Articles presented a film that 'will stroke your soul',<sup>132</sup> a film that 'is not ashamed of feeling, compassion and emotion'<sup>133</sup> or simply 'a moving film'.<sup>134</sup> In interviews the director confidently assumes that audiences will be leaving cinema's with wet eyes and that 'tissues are going to be handed out in cinemas'.<sup>135</sup> Numerous magazines and newspapers mentioned the director's infatuation with the story: 'the script moves me so much that it doesn't seem a waste to dedicate a year and a half of my life to it'.<sup>136</sup> This was simply meant to be a film where the audiences were welcome to cry.

While it can hardly be said that there is anything specifically Czech about moving stories, and the promotional campaign never explicitly attempted to make that connection, this consumable identity was important for the film's claims to Czechness. Specifically, the film's identity as a moving film was used to frame *Kolja* as an alternative to the films dominating Czech cinemas at the time. The scriptwriter Zdeněk Svěrák especially spends considerable effort in interviews in order to distance *Kolja* from what he presents as the usual fare found in cinemas. Several articles report him saying 'I believe that we miss a film that is about things like feeling and compassion'.<sup>137</sup> In another article he claims that many filmmakers ignore that 'there are many dramas [in life] that are not about death'.<sup>138</sup> In fact, several critics later found death to be one of the film's themes;<sup>139</sup> the protagonist spends a lot of his time at graveyards and *Kolja* himself has to cope with the unexpected death of his grandmother. The writer's reference to death in contemporary cinema instead seems to be a metonym standing for the action film and by extension Hollywood cinema. For example, when asked about the main message of the film, Svěrák starts his answer by exclaiming 'We are making a non-action film, I'd like to emphasise that'.<sup>140</sup> Svěrák's assumptions about the presence of action films in cinemas seem to have some factual base. In 1995 several films that can be attributed the label were succeeding in the box office: *The Specialist* (Luis Llosa,

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<sup>132</sup> Richard Unruh, 'Kolja pohladí po duši', *Blesk*, 10 November 1995, pp. 14-15.

<sup>133</sup> Eva Jeníková, 'Nový český film otce a syna Svěrákových Kolja se nestydí za cit, soucit a dojetí', *Svobodné slovo*, 16 May 1996, p. 14.

<sup>134</sup> Lucie Štaudová, 'Dojemný film otce a syna Svěrákových míří do kin', *Denní Telegraph*, 15 May 1996, p. 11.

<sup>135</sup> Klára Říhová, 'Kolja a ti druzí', *Květy*, 17 November 1995, pp. 26-27 (p. 27).

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., also in Unruh 'Kolja pohladí po duši', p. 14.

<sup>137</sup> Magdalena Bičíková, 'Přichází Kolja', *Kinorevue*, January 1996, pp. 26-28 (p. 28), also in Radana Vítková, 'Kolja už je tu!', *Dobrý večerník*, 15 May 1996, p. 13.

<sup>138</sup> Jan Svěrák, 'Zdeněk Svěrák: Rozhovor', *Cinema*, May 1996, pp. 40-42 (p. 41).

<sup>139</sup> For instance in Jan Foll 'Okupanti, boží mlýny a zázrak dorozumění', *Film a doba*, 42.1-2 (1996), 70-71 (p. 70).

<sup>140</sup> Říhová, 'Kolja a ti druzí', p. 27.

1994), *Waterworld* (Kevin Reynolds, 1995), *Die Hard with a Vengeance* (John McTiernan, 1995) and *Timecop* (Peter Hyams, 1994) all made the top 10 box office hits in 1995. On the other hand, *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994), arguably quite close to the emotional goals of *Kolya*, topped the box office that year by a considerable margin.<sup>141</sup> Svěrák is therefore correct to assume that there is a market for films exploring 'gentler emotions' but at the same time, they were not quite disappearing from Czech cinemas. Instead, his statements seem to refer to the action film in order to establish the film's Czechness. In fact, he decided to contrast his film to a genre that is rather un-Czech; usually demanding considerable budgets, it does not have much place in common perceptions about Czech cinema. Somewhere else he therefore makes it clear to audiences that this film is not 'action-packed "america" [sic] but a family film' that can be enjoyed by people of all generations.<sup>142</sup> In these attempts to frame *Kolya* in opposition to the Hollywood action film the film's promotion is not very different from many examples in other national contexts. For instance, in his analysis of *Elizabeth* (Shekhar Kapur, 1998) Andrew Higson observes the importance of differentiating the film from Hollywood productions in order to establish the film's national identity. Despite being funded from large multinational corporations, *Elizabeth* was meant to be a 'real British film' that would never have been green-lit in Hollywood.<sup>143</sup> Svěrák's statements about the sentiments of *Kolya* therefore function in a similar way. By comparing his film to an Other that has strong American connotations he helps to establish the film as an example of Czech qualities disappearing from Czech cinemas.

### Star Image and Traditions under Threat

Importantly for the interpretative and evaluative frameworks later employed in critical reception, this construction of *Kolya* as a film of gentle emotions that were disappearing from Czech cinemas was reinforced by Zdeněk Svěrák's image as an auteur of kind, humanist scripts continuing the best traditions of Czech comedy. Svěrák's writing style is often interpreted in academic accounts as being influenced by the inter-war comedies of the creative duo of Jan Werich and Jiří Voskovec,<sup>144</sup> who are also often perceived as a great

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<sup>141</sup> Halada, *Český film devadesátých let*, p. 39.

<sup>142</sup> Martina Dvořáková, 'Jak Louka ke štěstí přišel', *Večerník Praha*, 15 September 1995, supplement Dobrý Večer, pp. 6-7 (p. 7).

<sup>143</sup> Higson, *English Heritage, English Cinema*, pp. 200-1.

<sup>144</sup> Hames, 'The Czech and Slovak Republics: Velvet Revolution and After', p. 33.

influence on the work of the auteurs of the Czechoslovak New Wave.<sup>145</sup> Furthermore, these connections to canons drawn by critics and academics were supplemented by the fact that Svěrák's previous work for the absurdist theatre of Jára Cimrman, as well as several of the films he had written scripts for, had become accepted parts of popular Czech culture. These associations of Svěrák with canons of national culture and wider popularity can be gauged in the numerous descriptions of his image in *Kolya*'s ancillary materials. One such account can be found in Ondřej Štindl's review, who describes Svěrák's merits as follows:

Svěrák himself is actually an institution of its own kind: a wise man with kind eyes who would hardly harm anyone, publicly sides with unmistakably good things and, moreover, is sometimes even quite funny....[His previous work] was sufficiently understandable to the broadest audience; at the same time he has for many years managed to not cross the boundary of good taste and thanks to it maintained the favour of even the 'more difficult' part of the public.<sup>146</sup>

Throughout his career Svěrák simply built a reputation that was respected by broad audiences.

This seemingly universal reverence for Svěrák posed a bit of a problem for critics wanting to criticise *Kolya*. Commonly, expressing a negative view of the film is also accompanied by a gesture of admiration for his previous work. Two such reviews are especially interesting to look at in more detail now because of the very similar rhetorical devices and descriptions they use to introduce their opinion. Both reviews, for instance, open by mentioning the same story, that Svěrák has been recommended by MPs for the position of an ombudsman. The first sentences in a review of Jiří Peňás read:

Recently a certain MP came with a seriously meant idea for Zdeněk Svěrák to accept the position of cultural ombudsman. It was telling that while justifying his suggestion he completely omitted Svěrák's undying merits in the area of Cimrman explorations and fully focussed on the traits certainly not only he associated with the character of the charismatic scriptwriter and actor.<sup>147</sup>

Štindl's review starts in a very similar way: 'In debates about whether it would be advantageous to instate a function of ombudsman, someone put forward Zdeněk Svěrák's

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<sup>145</sup> Peter Hames, 'The Good Soldier Švejk and After: The Comic Tradition in Czech Film', in *100 Years of European Cinema: Entertainment or Ideology?*, ed. by Diana Holmes and Alison Smith (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 64-76 (p. 69).

<sup>146</sup> Štindl, 'Všude tam, kde je krásně čechoučko', p. 131.

<sup>147</sup> Jiří Peňás, 'Ekránové sny o sobě samých', *Respekt*, 20 May 1996, p. 19.

name for this position. We would hardly find a more fitting candidate, if we wanted to express the way the public perceives this actor and author'.<sup>148</sup> What is fascinating about these very similar introductions is the fact that they serve to set the context the writers see themselves as writing in – the purpose of mentioning the story in the review is to remind readers of the admiration Svěrák attracts, the fact that he is respected beyond the circles of cultural pundits or even general audiences and potentially reaches into the sphere of national politics. By invoking Svěrák's image and the fact that his influence reaches beyond the sphere of cultural production, they present the negative opinions that follow as being somewhat complicated - they admit that their criticism goes against the general consensus. As a result, they first need to express their awareness of the 'undying merits' of his previous work. As Štindl continues in his article, 'if a reviewer intends to raise his reservations about some of Svěrák's works, he also finds it necessary to clarify beforehand that he is well aware of all unquestionable merits of the object of his critique. After all, as can be seen, even the writer of these lines is no exception'.<sup>149</sup>

Svěrák was therefore clearly a highly respected name at the time and his significance went beyond his creative work, reaching into politics and, as both authors indicate, becoming a 'character' or 'an institution' in his own right. The popularity of this character and its associations with quality national production were also commonly emphasised in the promotional campaign of *Kolya*. Several publications conducted exclusive interviews with the writer and there are several terms especially that keep reappearing in descriptions of his personality and his personal writing style. The writer, we learn in these articles, represents a special combination of kindness, intelligent sense of humour and national consciousness. A three-page interview for the magazine *Kinorevue* that was published four months before the release of *Kolya* for example starts with a wordy description of all the numerous charitable traits Svěrák senior seems to possess:

Most people associate his person with sparkling humour, effortless refinement, pleasant demeanour and first of all with ingenious texts the high standard of which many of his fans have gotten used to taking as self-evident. Zdeněk Svěrák has been leaping over the highly set bar with remarkable ease so far: he is sophisticated and intelligible, decorous and funny, and even despite the growing pressure of his popularity he manages to avoid getting absorbed in cheap

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<sup>148</sup> Štindl, 'Všude tam, kde je krásně čechoučko', p. 131.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

trivialities. One can rarely see such meticulously measured amounts of conciliatoriness, kindness and adequate portion of proud patriotism.<sup>150</sup>

In this extract the author shows her ability to use a variety of synonyms in order to describe the author's humour, intelligence and kindness (funny, sophisticated, refined, pleasant, conciliatory). At the same time, she quite closely matches the image of Svěrák presented in many other articles, such as Peňás's description of Svěrák as a 'wise man with kind eyes who would hardly harm anyone'.<sup>151</sup>

As several academics studying stars have pointed out, star images often struggle to reinforce values under threat. Barbara Klinger, for instance, explores in her analysis of Rock Hudson's image 'the relation between a star's popular meaning' constructed in films and ancillary materials 'and the social function this meaning serves'.<sup>152</sup> She sees Hudson's image to be reinforcing conservative values that were contrasting contemporary anxieties about virility. She points out that 'Hudson was in this sense the veritable "Rock," a sign of the stability of certain old-fashioned notions of the "natural man" uncontaminated by complex social developments'.<sup>153</sup> It is therefore possible to see Svěrák's image to be part of such struggles to reinforce notions threatened by recent socio-political changes. For instance, the values Svěrák's image represents are strongly tied to ideas about Czechness. As can be seen in the quotes above, many descriptions of Svěrák are closely followed by claims about his patriotism. As the above-quoted journalist writes, Svěrák is the personification of 'measured amounts of conciliatoriness, kindness and adequate portion of patriotism'.<sup>154</sup> Similarly, Štindl also adds that on top of all his virtues Svěrák 'wishes only the best to the Czech nation'.<sup>155</sup> Another critic observes in his review that in Svěrák's image, the virtues of 'wisdom, kindness, irony, humour ... all meet in some sort of holy amalgam which we are thrilled to consider to be the essence of Czechness itself'.<sup>156</sup> Representing a cherished face of Czechness, Svěrák's image and his prominence in the ancillary material therefore seem to indicate certain anxieties 'about national identity and national status'.<sup>157</sup> It is perhaps telling that as a personification of Czech values Svěrák's character also occasionally turns into a teacher of

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<sup>150</sup> Magdalena Bičíková, 'Zdeněk Svěrák: O psaní, představách a prožitcích', *Kinorevue*, January 1996, pp. 31-33 (p. 31).

<sup>151</sup> Peňás, 'Ekránové sny o sobě samých'.

<sup>152</sup> Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning*, p. 97.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>154</sup> Bičíková, 'Zdeněk Svěrák: O psaní, představách a prožitcích', p. 31.

<sup>155</sup> Štindl, 'Všude tam, kde je krásně čechoučko', p. 131.

<sup>156</sup> Peňás, 'Ekránové sny o sobě samých'.

<sup>157</sup> Higson, *English Heritage, English Cinema*, pp. 6-7.

the nation who refines the audiences through his work. For example, we find out that 'Zdeněk Svěrák lightens this noble combination [of qualities] with soft irony, meticulously aimed at any signs of arrogance, cruel primitivism, intolerance or simple human stupidity, no matter whether manifesting on a national or private level'.<sup>158</sup>

As these examples indicate, the anxieties Svěrák's image seems to be addressing could potentially be analysed in relation to the socio-political developments in the country after the Velvet Revolution. However, it is not my aim here to analyse all the indications of the crisis of Czech national identity in post-Cold War world. Instead, for the purpose of this chapter I interpret the prominence of Svěrák's image in relation to ideas and opinions about Czech cinema in the 1990s. In the context of decreased production and unfulfilled hopes about increased quality of post-1989 cinema, Svěrák presents a stable and reliable source of national quality. Undoubtedly helped by the immense promotional campaign that preceded the film's release, for many journalists this was the most anticipated Czech film of the last decade.<sup>159</sup> Svěrák's popularity and reputation as an author continuing the best traditions of Czech comedy are seized upon in ancillary materials and turn him into a hope for national cinema. This much is indicated by several critics in their reviews. As one critic says, 'The whole nation likes Svěráks and respects them, *Kolja* was therefore anticipated as if it were to redeem Czech cinema from its crisis'.<sup>160</sup> Another critic similarly writes in her review that the premier of *Kolja* was anticipated (implicitly by everyone) as a 'moment of hope' for Czech cinema.<sup>161</sup> In the following section I want to therefore look at how Svěrák's image informed the interpretative frameworks of film critics and their notions of value.

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<sup>158</sup> Bičíková, 'Zdeněk Svěrák: O psaní, představách a prožitcích', p. 31.

<sup>159</sup> In Leoš Kofroň, 'Kolja', *Rock & Pop*, June 1996, p. 80, the critic even finds it acceptable to omit the standard summary of the film's plot due to the hype. As he says, 'I assume that the story's synopsis is sufficiently known even to those who don't really watch closely current film events, and therefore it is not necessary to concern ourselves with the plot closely. After all, the picture has received unmissable publicity and, together with typical Svěrák inobtrusiveness, they created an atmosphere that indicated that this was going to be this year's film event number one'. This quote also nicely shows the strength of Svěrák's reputation. The grand scale of the film's promotion was apparently somewhat at odds with the writer's image as a modest Czech writer and therefore it also needs to be described as 'inobtrusive'. I will return to these efforts to contain elements that might contradict usual understandings of Svěrák's image shortly.

<sup>160</sup> Jeníková, 'Nový český film otce a syna Svěrákových Kolja se nestydí za cit, soucit a dojetí'.

<sup>161</sup> Sonja Kroupová, 'S Koljou se do českého filmu vrací obyčejný lidský příběh', *Denní Telegraph*, 17 May 1996, p. 11.

## Critical Reception – Return of Quality

Svěrák's established reputation as a producer of quintessentially Czech and universally revered works had the effect that he was commonly perceived as the authorial figure behind the film. In contrast to this, the discussions around his son who directed the film commonly form an image of a young creative worker trying to find his own signature and aiming to step out of his father's shadow. While not ever dismissing Svěrák junior's work as sub-par, critics in fact usually spend the majority of reviews discussing the script and performance of his father. The director's contribution is usually summarised only towards the end of the review, often in conjunction with other aspects of the film (usually cinematography and music). Critics deal with the writer's prominence as the auteur figure in numerous ways, however. Some embrace his dominance as natural ('if a picture is to be worth anything, its base stone is a quality script'<sup>162</sup>) or they might try to redeem the director's work ('Previously the son "obediently" filmed daddy's work. This time he took dad's script off the ground ... and gave it wings'<sup>163</sup>). In any of these rhetorics, however, critics merely reaffirm the perception of Svěrák senior's status as the dominant figure in the creative duo.

As a result of the writer's reputation, many critics evaluated *Kolja* in the context of his previous work. It is therefore not unusual to see critics praising the film for 'typical Svěrákian wit'.<sup>164</sup> Furthermore, the terms critics used to describe the film were remarkably close to Svěrák's image maintained in promotion. *Kolja* was predominantly interpreted as a 'human' film full of kind humour – kindness, humour, and intelligence noticeable from the film's script were all highlighted as the film's great qualities. A variation of these words was mentioned in virtually every major review while the phrase 'kind comedy' was used as a common generic label. For instance, daily newspaper *Lidové noviny* finds the film to be mainly relying on 'situation and dialogue humour – enormously human and kind'.<sup>165</sup> Another critic also praises the film because, there is 'no trace of aggression, malice and vulgarity', in it, with 'humour inoffensive and kind'.<sup>166</sup> That these qualities are part of the writer's oeuvre is pointed out by another critic who thinks that 'in Svěrák's case it is unnecessary to

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<sup>162</sup> Kofroň, 'Kolja'.

<sup>163</sup> Tomáš Baldýnský, 'Kolja', *Reflex*, 30 May 1996, p. 49.

<sup>164</sup> Jeníková, 'Nový český film otce a syna Svěrákových Kolja se nestydí za cit, soucit a dojetí'.

<sup>165</sup> Oxana Tulajdanová, 'Nestydte se za slzy, očistí vaši duši', *Lidové noviny*, 16 May 1996, p. 11.

<sup>166</sup> Kofroň, 'Kolja'.

emphasise the suaveness, wit and punchiness of really funny dialogues, [which are] today essential parts of his handwriting'.<sup>167</sup>

In fact, several critics display a considerable commitment to interpreting the film in relation to the values represented by Svěrák's image. Attributes and interpretations that do not quite fit with Svěrák's persona as a kind humanist auteur are often neutralised in reviews and are instead connected to the writer's talent for measure and his reputation as a masterful writer with great sense for tastefulness. This is especially the case with the sexual themes of the film. On the one hand, sexual themes were clearly one of the attractions promoted before the film's release. The trailer, for instance, hints at elements of eroticism and titillation. It shows the sexual tension between Louka and his young cello student (Silvia Šuvadová). In a brief dialogue exchange this young woman smilingly tells Louka that she wants to learn to play the cello because she likes how big it is. Louka responds suggestively in a soft voice: 'So you like bigger instruments?' Later in the trailer, in its collage of shots from the film we also see Louka sensually leaning over the neck of his young student as she plays the cello. Another shot lingers for a few seconds on the outstretched naked leg of Libuše Šafránková's character in bed. While definitely not the main theme emphasised in the trailer, eroticism had its place in the variety of attractions highlighted in the promotional campaign. This attraction was developed in the film by Louka himself who is depicted as having a weakness for women. In one scene his relationship with his young student Blanka almost gets sexual. He is seen taking off Blanka's underwear, but they are interrupted by little Kolya who finishes his bath early. As Blanka turns towards the camera in surprise, she shows her bared chest for a few seconds. The presence of eroticism did not go unnoticed in reviews. One critic, for instance, interprets the film as a 'polyhedron about sex, death and selfless understanding'.<sup>168</sup> However, the sexual content clearly sits uncomfortably in the established image of Svěrák as a kind teacher of the nation. This critic therefore clarifies that despite some innuendos in the film, it 'doesn't sound vulgar but reveals the writer's masterful play with words (but also moods, situations, characters)'.<sup>169</sup> Another critic also says that 'In Svěrák's writing you will not find traces of aggression, malice and vulgarity. Yes, he often uses juicier expressions, but such words have charm, wit, poetry in his delivery'.<sup>170</sup> Again, while Louka's promiscuity and his advances towards his student could potentially be

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<sup>167</sup> Vladimír Wohlföhner, 'Laskavé retro Kolja rehabilituje český film', *Český týdeník*, 17 May 1996, p. 11.

<sup>168</sup> Foll 'Okupanti, boží mlýny a zázrak dorozumění', p. 70.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Kofroň, 'Kolja'.



interpreted as inappropriate, the critic instead discourages this interpretation and uses terms such as 'poetry', and 'juicy' to soften the edge of such content and promises 'charm' and 'wit'.<sup>171</sup>

As I have been trying to demonstrate in this section, critical reception drew heavily on Zdeněk Svěrák's image in order to negotiate the film's value. Furthermore, these attributes possessed by the film are in reviews turned into national traditions disappearing from current Czech films. A strategy that critics commonly employ in order to highlight *Kolya*'s exceptionality is contrasting the film's qualities with perceptions about contemporary Czech cinema. Reviews of *Kolya* depict the Czech film industry as a rather desolate wasteland, or as one critic calls it, a land of 'schoolboy experiments'.<sup>172</sup> Specifically, 13 out of the 16 positive reviews collected for this project compare the film to the mediocre recent output of Czech filmmakers. One critic for instance thinks that 'after a long time ..., an exceptionally played, emotional and intelligent Czech film' emerged.<sup>173</sup> Another critic also thinks that *Kolya* is 'enormously human and kind [and] does not have anything in common with the ironic or sarcastic smirk of many Czech films made after 1989'.<sup>174</sup> By reiterating Svěrák's image as a guarantee of quality that does not disappoint even in these dark times, these critics not only nostalgically remind readers of a past that was more creatively productive but also define the characteristics of this more valuable past. As a result, *Kolya* and its qualities are often presented as 'returned' and 'renewed'. One critic simply states that the film 'rehabilitates Czech cinema',<sup>175</sup> another critic points out that the film 'returns pureness and compassion' into Czech cinema<sup>176</sup> or that *Kolya* 'returns ordinary human story to Czech cinema'.<sup>177</sup> These critics seem to be hungry for quality Czech filmmaking and in this seemingly barren environment, *Kolya* finally managed to not only deliver it but bring it back.

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<sup>171</sup> Ironically, in 'Czech Cinema: From State Industry to Competition' written a few years after *Kolya*'s release, Peter Hames connected the film to the traditions of Czech quality cinema through its sexual themes. Specifically, he finds that 'the comic eroticism' of *Kolya* 'recalls the mood of *Closely Watched Trains*', another Czech Oscar-winner (p. 80). However, since at the time of its release *Kolya* was meant to be an alternative to decadent Hollywood, it seems such connections were not easy to make and therefore different connections to Czech culture were more commonly employed.

<sup>172</sup> Kroupová, 'S Koljou se do českého filmu vrací obyčejný lidský příběh'.

<sup>173</sup> Jan Foll, 'Zlatá klec, boží mlýny a dětské slzy', *Týden*, 20 May 1996, p. 69.

<sup>174</sup> Tulajdanová, 'Nestydíte se za slzy, očistí vaši duši'.

<sup>175</sup> Wohlhöffner, 'Laskavé retro Kolja rehabilituje český film'.

<sup>176</sup> Štaudová, 'Dojemný film otce a syna Svěrákových míří do kin'.

<sup>177</sup> Kroupová, 'S Koljou se do českého filmu vrací obyčejný lidský příběh'.

## The Value of Recognition

So far, I have looked at how the interpretative strategies circulating in the promotion and reception of *Kolya* were influenced by anxieties about the state of Czech cinema. The dominating presence of Hollywood and dissatisfaction about the quality of contemporary film production constituted a seemingly ideal environment for Svěrák's image as a writer of Czech quality texts. As a result, a large amount of ancillary materials drew heavily on his image and valued *Kolya* as a return of Czech quality after a long time. However, as Mette Hjort points out, 'within certain discourses of a nationalist bent, cultural specificity is systematically linked to ideas about international publics'.<sup>178</sup> Similarly, Higson stresses the strong connection of British 1980s and 1990s costume dramas to the heritage industry, and their role in transmitting specific visions of Britishness at home and abroad.<sup>179</sup> In this section I want to therefore look at how the debates about the film were affected by an awareness of its journey abroad. Specifically, I want to focus on the significance placed on the film's international recognition in the flow of talk. I briefly look at the film as a representative of a nation wanting to reform its international image after the fall of communism in 1989 and then turn to the employment of foreign recognition in arguments about the film's value.

Using Danish cinema as an example, Hjort argues that 'the creation of a national cinema is part of a politics of recognition'.<sup>180</sup> Relying on the discourse of equality, in the politics of recognition 'it becomes a matter of claiming that it is an individual's basic right to demand that his or her particular mode of authentic self-expression be recognized as having at least the same value as other forms of self-expression'.<sup>181</sup> Indeed, we can glimpse this desire for recognition from outside in the ancillary materials of *Kolya*. They were undoubtedly fuelled by several elements, for instance by its status as a co-production financed from the European *Eurimages* fund and a British co-producer. Furthermore, one of Jan Svěrák's previous collaborations with his father *The Elementary School* was nominated for an Oscar in the foreign language category a few years before *Kolya*'s release. Moreover, news that the film was going to screen at the Venice Film Festival and that the US distribution rights had been acquired by Miramax appeared in newspapers even before the film's Czech premiere. This acquisition was seen especially important, since as one critic clarified, 'Apart from the fact that a Czech film will appear in cinemas of the United States after a long time,

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<sup>178</sup> Hjort, 'Danish Cinema and the Politics of Recognition', p. 520.

<sup>179</sup> Higson, *English Heritage, English Cinema*, p. 56.

<sup>180</sup> Hjort, 'Danish Cinema and the Politics of Recognition', p. 520.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 527.

it means an important base in case *Kolya* is nominated for an Oscar'.<sup>182</sup> This article was published one day before the film's Czech premiere and almost a year before it actually won the Oscar, but it indicates how early the promise of potential foreign recognition was established in the flow of talk. Similarly, several reviews of the film hypothesised about its international reception a few months in advance. The nostalgic rhetorics in them not only evoke ideas of quality missing from contemporary cinema but also define the past of Czech cinema as being capable of attracting international attention. One review, for instance, believes that: 'After a long time comes an unmistakably Czech film capable of appealing also to foreign audiences'.<sup>183</sup> Another critic exclaims that *Kolya* is a film 'that will surely attract domestic audience, and which perhaps again has a chance to succeed abroad'.<sup>184</sup> The film's audiences have barely started buying tickets to see the film, but this film's standing as a potential representative of Czech cinema abroad was already being incorporated into evaluations of it.

As Hjort says, there are many ways in which one can try to measure the success of a small national cinema. For instance:

the term [success] is appropriate when the films produced by a given small national cinema provide evidence of a diversity of cinematic expression, secure a more than respectable share of the domestic box office, win numerous prizes on the international festival circuit, achieve some measure of international distribution, attract funding from various public and private sector sources at the national, supranational and international levels, and provide a platform for actors, directors, cinematographers and other professionals to pursue filmmaking opportunities both within and outside the national film industry on the kind of regular basis that allows skills to be maintained and further developed.<sup>185</sup>

Hjort indicates that a national cinema's success is a matter of continued recognition rather than just one limited occurrence. However, *Kolya* satisfied several of these criteria and was commonly celebrated for it in ancillary materials. It successfully drew Czech audiences to cinemas in a year of record-low attendance. Apart from its positive critical reception,

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<sup>182</sup> Mirka Spáčilová, 'Otce a syna Svěrákovy jejich Kolja dojíká', *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 15 May 1996, p.18.

<sup>183</sup> Vladimír Wohlhőfner, 'Laskavé retro Kolja rehabilituje český film', *Český týdeník*, 17 May 1996, p. 11.

<sup>184</sup> Radana Vítková, 'Hra o citech na city', *Dobry večerník*, 17 May 1996, p. 12.

<sup>185</sup> Mette Hjort, 'Denmark', p. 26.

newspapers seemed to be thrilled to report that ‘after a long, long time a film has come to cinemas that is sold out and tickets to which are being bought many days in advance’.<sup>186</sup> Indeed, it became the highest grossing film of 1996<sup>187</sup> and remained in cinemas long after its premiere, becoming also the most attended film the next year (albeit not the highest grossing one).<sup>188</sup> At the same time, news articles widely reported on the film’s successes at international film festivals. When *Kolya* won two awards at a film festival in Madrid, one article bringing this news to its readers had the modest title ‘Kolya conquers the world after Czech cinemas’.<sup>189</sup> Similarly, when the film won the Oscar, this news was commonly broken in articles that claimed that *Kolya* ‘conquered America’.<sup>190</sup> Another writer labelled *Kolya*’s Oscar win as ‘the return of Czech film to the imaginary Olympus of world cinema’.<sup>191</sup> The Oscar especially seemed to have at least partially fulfilled the circulating hopes of international recognition of Czech cinema.

On the one hand, ancillary texts saw *Kolya*’s international recognition as an important step in the career of the young director; potentially allowing him to ‘pursue filmmaking opportunities both within and outside the national film industry’.<sup>192</sup> Perhaps not so coincidentally, news articles about the awards the film was winning were also commonly accompanied by the mention that his next film was going to be filmed in English language.<sup>193</sup> However, the importance of such recognition as a matter of national representation was not negligible. After all, the submissions for the Academy Award for the Best Foreign Language Film (now called Best International Feature Film since 2020) are chosen by national academies, and each country is allowed to submit only one film per year. The submission for the category itself therefore involves the selection of a work that is going to represent the annual output of a whole national cinema. Similar to sports events, it is not only individuals (or teams) who compete here but whole countries. Therefore, when Jack Valenti presents the Oscar for the category in 1997, he says that ‘the Oscar goes to the Czech Republic for

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<sup>186</sup> Senta Tesárová, ‘Kolja je i po několika týdnech v kinech neustále vyprodán’, *ZN zemské noviny*, 5 June 1996, p. 14.

<sup>187</sup> Kinomaniak. *Na co se chodilo do kina v roce 1996?*, 31 January 2017, available at <<https://kinomaniak.cz/navstevnost-filmu/roci/1996/>> [accessed 23 December 2019].

<sup>188</sup> Kinomaniak. *Na co se chodilo do kina v roce 1997?*, 7 February 2017, available at <<https://kinomaniak.cz/navstevnost-filmu/roci/1997/divaci/>> [accessed 23 December 2019].

<sup>189</sup> Jaromíra Sitařová, ‘Po českých kinech dobývá Kolja i svět’, *Práce*, 11 October 1996, p. 13.

<sup>190</sup> Jakub Lederer, ‘Otec a syn Svěrákovi dobyli konečně Ameriku’, *ZN zemské noviny*, 26 March 1997, p. 5, but also in Česká tisková kancelář, ‘Kolja dobyl Ameriku’, *Pražské noviny*, 26 March 1997, pp. 1-2. It seems that ‘Kolya conquered America’ was the headline chosen by the Czech News Agency.

<sup>191</sup> Jakub Lederer, ‘Herci komentují úspěch Kolji’, *ZN zemské noviny*, 26 March 1997, p. 5.

<sup>192</sup> Hjort, ‘Denmark’, p. 26.

<sup>193</sup> Lederer, Jakub, ‘Zdeněk Svěrák dostal lva a připravuje nový film’, *ZN zemské noviny*, 3 March 1997, p. 5.

*Kolya*'.<sup>194</sup> The director, the writer, as well as the Russian boy and British producer who also take the stage to accept the award are doing so seemingly on behalf of the Czech nation. In this patriotic spirit, one newspaper article also reported that: 'We have an Oscar after thirty years,'<sup>195</sup> as if the whole nation somehow contributed to or shared the film's success. This success and especially the recognition from the American Academy therefore had a strong presence in the media and was seen as an important moment for Czech culture and nation. Articles bringing the news about the success at Academy Awards were widely printed on the front pages of national and regional newspapers. Apart from being accompanied by the smiling faces of the filmmakers with the statue, they also commonly mentioned that the president of the country congratulated them for this achievement.

In the case of *Kolya*, the nationalist discourse in ancillary materials also indicates a nation rebuilding its image after 1989. The director, apparently somewhat conscious of the role he was playing at the Academy Awards, phrased his acceptance speech as a geography lesson to the Oscar (and the international audience in general): 'Dear Oscar, ... you're going to Prague. You don't know where it is, it is in Europe'.<sup>196</sup> As Ladislav Holý has pointed out, in the 1990s the Czech Republic aimed to portray an image of a cultured nation for whom the Velvet Revolution and the subsequent transition to market economy marked a 'return to Europe' after the (non-European and uncivilised) communist rule.<sup>197</sup> The director's success at the awards ceremony with this quality film production further underlined by his speech therefore seems to be showing to the multi-national audiences that the country had, indeed, returned to the cultured Europe. Similarly, the (mis)translations of the director's speech in Czech press are also a fascinating indication of these image-building hopes held for the film's recognition. One writer for example replaces Prague with the Czech Republic, and thus further highlights the metonymic function of the city in the speech.<sup>198</sup> Magazine *Cinema* (in a special issue dedicated to the film's Oscar success), on the other hand, reports the director saying that Prague 'is in the middle of Europe'.<sup>199</sup> This change to the speech reminds the Czech dislike of being classified as part of Eastern Europe and preferring to think of the

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<sup>194</sup> Oscars, "Kolya" Wins Foreign Language Film: 1997 Oscars, 13 February 2014 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VLNPKQ0M9ws>> [accessed 12 July 2020].

<sup>195</sup> Anon., 'Kolja dosáhl na metu nejvyšší, po třiceti letech máme Oscara', *Práce*, 26 March 1997, pp. 1, 13.

<sup>196</sup> Oscars, "Kolya" Wins Foreign Language Film: 1997 Oscars.

<sup>197</sup> Ladislav Holý, *The Little Czech and the Great Czech Nation: National Identity and the Post-Communist Transformation of Society* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 151

<sup>198</sup> Lederer, 'Otec a syn Svěrákovi dobyli konečně Ameriku'.

<sup>199</sup> Anon., 'Oscar '96', *Cinema*, special issue 1997.

country as being located in 'the heart of Europe'.<sup>200</sup> Other commentators in the press also noted the political goals the film's success could be used for. One journalist describes the fans of the film in the government as hopefuls aiming to turn the film 'into a miracle weapon, the effectivity of which, as well as its compatibility with American belief in human goodness, can open our doors to NATO'.<sup>201</sup>

*Kolya's* achievements were therefore several; many film critics saw it as a rare quality product in an otherwise unexceptional output of the nation's cinema. Furthermore, this version of Czechness achieved a success that could even help to shape the nation's image abroad. However, ancillary materials did not necessarily find the film's international recognition to be a sign of improving conditions in the film industry. It was instead posed more as an example for other Czech filmmakers to follow. One writer believes that the director was simply not wasting his time 'weeping over the unfortunate state of national cinema' like many other Czech filmmakers, because 'he had to learn how to sell a small Czech idea in the big United States'.<sup>202</sup> This critic is particularly positive about the extensive promotional campaign that accompanied the film at home and abroad. With this award, according to her, the Svěráks 'did Czech cinema the greatest service – they showed that it's not enough to film a Piece and wait with hands on your lap for laurels and millions to fall from above'.<sup>203</sup> By taking an active part in the film's promotion and devising a successful campaign, this recognition is also meant to be a demonstration of how to sell a Czech film in the big (capitalist) world. More importantly for the purposes of this chapter, however, the film's success at the Oscars became a turning point for arguments about the film's value, as it started being employed as an ultimate validation of the film's significance. Before I return to this point, I want to look at some of the reservations about the film's artistic achievements expressed in the flow of talk.

### Purity vs. Recognition

The road towards recognition often involves tuning the national to the interests and habits of international publics. In her work, Hjort looks at the strategy of leveraging that she finds several Danish filmmakers active in the 1970s and 1980s to be employing in order to satisfy the national cinema's politics of recognition. She argues that these Danish directors

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<sup>200</sup> Holý, *The Little Czech and the Great Czech Nation*, p. 151.

<sup>201</sup> Tomáš Kafka, 'Wunderwaffe Kolja', *Lidové noviny*, 29 March 1997, supplement Národní (13), p. vi.

<sup>202</sup> Mirka Spáčilová, 'Jedni pláčou, druzí vozí Oscary', *Mladá Fronta Dnes*, 26 March 1997, p. 12.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

consciously rely on certain ‘international elements’ that aim to extend a film’s relevance to foreign publics. For instance, characters in *Pelle the Conqueror* (*Pelle Erobreren*; Bille August, 1987) talk about their dream to emigrate to America. In this sequence the film therefore reminds stories of people from other countries who were driven to emigrate due to poverty and constructs America as ‘the crucible in which all European nations have been combined’.<sup>204</sup> The assumption behind the idea of leveraging is that national cinema of a small nation can hardly attract recognition by vehemently insisting merely on its foreignness and otherness.<sup>205</sup> Instead, its place in the world needs to be constructed as connected to foreign publics.

With its aims to go abroad, *Kolya*’s pre-release publicity also indicated the presence of leveraging strategies in the production of the film. For example, if Zdeněk Svěrák’s image was central in shaping the claims about the film’s connections to Czech traditions, the image of his son, director Jan Svěrák, helped to reinforce the hopes that this Czechness will successfully appeal to international audiences. Ancillary materials depicted the thirty-one-year-old Svěrák as a young director of great talent, especially after his previous nomination for an Oscar for *The Elementary School*. Interviews and previews present him as keen to learn from the best and often finding inspiration in Hollywood films. In these accounts, instead of representing a threat to national cinema, Hollywood is a hive of beauty, professionalism and refined craft. In an interview promoting *Kolya*, Zdeněk Svěrák for example talks about his son as a director who puts in his films ‘what he admires about American films’.<sup>206</sup> Especially the director’s previous films *Accumulator 1* (*Akumulátor 1*; 1994) and *The Ride* (*Jízda*; 1994) were being described as homages to ‘his American idols’.<sup>207</sup> Similarly, in one interview the director himself confesses his love for the orchestral scores of ‘the beautiful great American films’ and admits to his dream to one day collaborate with John Williams.<sup>208</sup> Somewhere else he describes Spielberg as ‘the king of film narration’ and Ridley Scott a ‘film magician. His *Blade Runner* gets entangled in my VCR all the time’.<sup>209</sup> Therefore, if on the one hand *Kolya* was

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<sup>204</sup> Bille August, quoted in Hjort, ‘Danish Cinema and the Politics of Recognition’, p. 530.

<sup>205</sup> Hjort argues that focusing on difference alone is employed more commonly to the aim of highlighting ‘political and economic injustices (p. 530).’ On the other hand, nation-states with developed democracies such as Denmark ‘make unlikely victims.’

<sup>206</sup> Bičíková, ‘Zdeněk Svěrák: O psaní, představách a prožitcích’, p. 32.

<sup>207</sup> For example in Bičíková, ‘Přichází Kolja’, p. 28, Jaroslav Sedláček, ‘Svěráci’, *Cinema*, special issue 1997, pp. 50-56 (pp. 54-55), but also in Halada, *Český film devadesátých let*, p. 122-125.

<sup>208</sup> Jan Svěrák quoted in Richard Unruh, ‘Mám rád patos a smýčce’, *Blesk*, 10 November 1995, p. 15.

<sup>209</sup> Sedláček, ‘Svěráci’, p. 56. While not being American, it is quite likely that Ridley Scott would be more commonly seen as a representative of Hollywood cinema rather than English or British cinema. While to my knowledge there is no study on how non-English speaking audiences recognise and

meant to be a form of resistance to the dominating presence of Hollywood in Czech cinemas, it was also highly indebted to it. As Hjort argues, in the strategy of leveraging, what she calls 'international elements' 'become the lever enabling various forms of cultural specificity to appear before, and to be recognized by, international publics'.<sup>210</sup> We can therefore see the parallel evocations of Czech comedy traditions and inspiration in Hollywood quality in ancillary materials as promises of leveraging similar to what Hjort describes. With the help of this young filmmaker, Czech traditions might find a form even foreign audiences can connect with.

While in the environment of small national cinemas introducing and promoting 'international elements' in the flow of talk can therefore mobilise hopes for recognition, it also brings dangers of minimising the cultural specificity. As Hjort, points out, 'Only rarely does the imitative capacity to produce products resembling those of a dominant culture meet with applause'.<sup>211</sup> Similarly, a common pejorative used for some European co-productions is the term Euro-pudding which targets the compromises these films supposedly make to appeal to multi-national audiences, especially their tendencies to 'erase cultural specificity in favour of strategic casting and language decisions'.<sup>212</sup> Therefore, in the case of leveraging, it is important that the particular film is still clearly rooted in a national culture. Similarly, as *Kolya* travelled abroad, overt 'internationalisation' loomed over the flow of talk as a potential danger. This can be seen in the attempts to assure Czech audiences that the film is more Czech than 'international'. Svěrák-the-writer was also found to be 'internationalising' his script to some extent. He describes the preparation of the film's international distribution as a negotiation, a matter of balancing translatable and what Hjort calls 'opaque features' – elements that are not noticeable or even understandable to publics unfamiliar with the culture.<sup>213</sup> He explained in interviews that after receiving notes from the British co-producer he had added several lines of dialogue to the script in order to clarify certain contexts to foreign audiences. As he describes the process, 'The English producer would tell me when he stumbled upon something in the script he didn't understand, and I had two options. Either to come to terms with the fact that a foreigner wouldn't understand

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differentiate between British and American cinemas, my hypothesis would be that the film's setting and its stars would be more important for their definitions than the accent of the director.

<sup>210</sup> Hjort, 'Danish Cinema and the Politics of Recognition', p. 530.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., p. 526.

<sup>212</sup> Vidal, *Heritage Film*, p. 64.

<sup>213</sup> Hjort, 'Danish Cinema and the Politics of Recognition', p. 530.



it or to make it comprehensible'.<sup>214</sup> Here the writer seemingly admits to submitting to the pressure to appeal to foreign audiences. Therefore, he also stresses that writing for the foreign spectator was not in the forefront of his mind. He says that he 'wrote *Kolya*'s script as a normal script for a Czech film because I can't do it in any other way .... I knew that some things would stay there only for us.... The international public will get maybe seventy per cent'.<sup>215</sup> Another article also clarifies that '*Kolya*, whose international premiere is planned for the September Venice festival, will remain more of a "pretty Czech film" since its poetry, humour, and, most of all, Slavic word plays are hardly transferable'.<sup>216</sup> As Hjort points out, attracting domestic publics relies especially on opaque elements, which promise to the given public that 'their language, humour, and ... practices, are central to, or at least represented, in a given film'.<sup>217</sup> Therefore, claims about the film's Czech qualities, its rootedness in perceptions about Czech culture are also employed to assure readers that the film remains Czech, that indeed *their* culture will be presented abroad and not a diluted internationalised identity-less product.

Despite the image of Czechness the scriptwriter fervently portrayed in ancillary materials (or maybe because of it), one discourse appearing in the flow of talk after the film's release was questioning whether *Kolya* was truly authentically Czech or whether it was overly sacrificing its specificity to better its chances in foreign markets. Some critics especially associated the film's pathos as either an example of Hollywood influence on the filmmakers or simply as their attempt to try to appease foreign audiences. What appears in critical reception is an image of Hollywood as sentimental, excessive, overbearingly powerful and not subtle.<sup>218</sup> The Czech mode of expression would be, assumingly in contrast to this, modest and small. One critic for instance thinks that 'while on the outside *Kolya* disarms emotionally almost in Hollywood style, it nevertheless remains rooted in local hills of small tragicomedies, kind loves and concrete politics'.<sup>219</sup> The threat of Hollywood excess is noticeable in this review; in order to argue for the film's value, the critic highlights its indebtedness to local traditions and clarifies that the levels of sentimentality do not quite reach the Hollywood

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<sup>214</sup> Zdeněk Svěrák quoted in Magda Müllerová, 'Kolja má Oscara!', *ZN zemské noviny*, 28 March 1997, supplement *Náš domov*, p. 1.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., the same answer also appears in Boris Dočekal, 'Na Oscara jsem nemyslel', *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 20 March 1997, supplement *Magazín Dnes*, pp. 10-11 (p. 10),

<sup>216</sup> Spáčilová, 'Otce a syna Svěrákovy jejich Kolja dojíímá'.

<sup>217</sup> Hjort, 'Danish Cinema and the Politics of Recognition', p. 530.

<sup>218</sup> Similar image of Hollywood has historically figured in critical discourses on other national cinemas. See for instance Julian Petley, 'The Lost Continent', in *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema*, ed. by Charles Barr (London: British Film Institute, 1986), pp. 98-119.

<sup>219</sup> Mirka Spáčilová, 'Hezký český Kolja se netají tím, že se chce líbit', *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 16 May 1996, p. 19.

levels. Another critic, on the other hand, while being generally favourable towards the film, finds the film's sentimentality to be overdone, reaching the levels of 'blackmail' and 'kitsch'.<sup>220</sup> According to her, 'It seems that in those moments *Kolya* associates itself rather disparately with the narrative style of *Accumulator 1* rather than the modest, funny and simple narration of *The Elementary School* that is apparently closer to it'.<sup>221</sup> As I mentioned above, a number of articles published around the release of *Kolya* perceived *Accumulator 1* as the director's homage to high-energy American films. On the other hand, *The Elementary School*, with its idyllic landscapes of post-war Czechoslovakia and status as Zdeněk Svěrák's semi-autobiography, was commonly recognised for its engagement with notions of Czech heritage. What this reviewer eventually seems to be calling for in her preference for the 'more modest' *Elementary School* is a more 'Czech' film.

Apart from the film's sentimentality, what *Kolya* was perceived to be indicating about Czech national identity was also questioned by some critics. In the most negative reviews, the Czechness of the film was interpreted as deceiving rather than an authentic representation of the nation. The title of the review published in magazine *Respekt* can be translated as 'Screen Dreams about Ourselves'.<sup>222</sup> The author of the review calls the film 'Wunscherfüllung', an uncritical image merely showing characteristics Czechs would like to see themselves as possessing.<sup>223</sup> Another critic, writing for the literary newspaper *Literární noviny*, also agrees that the film feeds Czech self-lies. According to him, *Kolya* 'dismisses mystery, surprise, desire to search – we know here straight away that the modest Czech chivalry and slightly self-ironic congeniality will win, it's only about presenting the journey tastefully, "classy". At the same time, it's supposedly not meant to be a fairy tale but the "whole truth"'.<sup>224</sup> For both, the film is not a truthful exploration of Czechness but a dream and a fairy tale that was selling distorted images not only to home audiences but also the world. To develop his dissatisfaction with the film, Jiří Cieslar comments that *Kolya* gives the impression that it 'was made for foreign tourists'.<sup>225</sup> According to these critics, in its goal to please many publics, the film seems to have sacrificed too much.

These negative opinions were notably published mainly in specialised newspapers and periodicals representing the 'quality' end of press. As such, they demonstrate how taste

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<sup>220</sup> Radana Vítková, 'Hra o citech na city', *Dobry večerník*, 17 May 1996, p. 12.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Peňás, 'Ekránové sny o sobě samých'.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Jiří Cieslar, 'Kolja', *Literární noviny*, 3 July 1996, p. 15.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

formations employ different notions of value and struggle for authority.<sup>226</sup> Cieslar for example dismisses other critics for behaving like 'PR officers of the film'.<sup>227</sup> He believes that this film is not 'art' but an escapist, commercial 'product'. He shows a preference for a different kind of cinema; cinema that, 'demystifies' the nation (in a way comparable to Svěrák's previous work) and evokes a sense of discomfort. As he puts it, he prefers cinema that 'is characterised not by pouring oil into well-running gears of life comfort and illusions, but which throws a few dragging grains of sand into it'.<sup>228</sup> Similarly, criticism of the film was dismissed by some as bitter and elitist; in the words of one writer, the film was disliked especially by 'critics cultivating cult films of charismatic personalities of independent cinemas'.<sup>229</sup> As Bourdieu argued, differences between taste formations are not simply defined by interests of specific groups, but are also the result of struggles between these groups.<sup>230</sup>

While *Kolja*'s initial critical reception was rather positive (only three out of sixteen analysed reviews panned the film), negative opinions aroused rather strong emotions. To counter the negative opinions, a particular rhetoric was employed by the defenders of the film in this struggle. They insisted that the film's recognition abroad surely outweighed any negatives of the film. As de Valck says, 'A prize or award is the most tangible form of symbolic capital'<sup>231</sup> and several writers tended to use the film's collection of gathered symbolic capital, especially after the Academy Awards ceremony, as a bullet proof confirmation of the film's values that seemingly invalidated any criticism directed at the film; how can anyone speak negatively about a film that achieved more than any other Czech production since the revolution? For instance, in one post-Oscar interview actor Ondřej Vetchý expresses his annoyance over the fact that 'some, instead of being proud of what the two of them [director and scriptwriter] did for Czech cinema, talk about emotional calculation and kitsch'.<sup>232</sup> According to Vetchý, such criticism is nothing else but envy.<sup>233</sup> The interesting thing about these counterarguments is that they aim to divert all the attention to the recognition

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<sup>226</sup> Jancovich, 'Genre and the Audience', pp. 33-45.

<sup>227</sup> Cieslar, 'Kolja'.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

<sup>229</sup> Jiří Just, 'Kolja nemohl být jiný', *Lidové noviny*, 31 August 1996, supplement Nedelní Lidové noviny (35), p. xvi.

<sup>230</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction*.

<sup>231</sup> Marijke de Valck, 'Fostering Art, Adding Value, Cultivating Taste: Film Festival as Site of Cultural Legitimization', in *Film Festivals: History, Theory, Practice*, ed. by Marijke de Valck, Brendan Kredell and Skadi Loist (Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 104-118 (p. 110).

<sup>232</sup> Ondřej Vetchý quoted in Anon., 'Co pro vás Kolja znamená?', *Cinema*, special issue 1997, pp. 28-29 (p. 28).

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

achieved, seemingly making it the primary criterion of the film's value. Another writer urges his readers, for instance, to focus on the film's achievements: 'Let's not concern ourselves with the evil tongues that accused *Kolja* ... of subjecting much to foreign success and getting the statue. Whether it's true or not, it will all be forgotten sooner or later, but the Oscar and its mark on history will remain'.<sup>234</sup> In this article the award is not only a tangible evidence of quality but also an eternal demonstration of the film's achievements.

With regards to the British heritage films Higson notices that 'the claims made for them ... often seem to insist on the purity and distinctiveness of a traditional Englishness and eschew the particular type of cross-cultural intertextuality that is such a strong feature of contemporary aesthetics'.<sup>235</sup> In the case of *Kolja* critics do seem to prefer purity to some extent. Indeed, one critic's exclamation that 'After a long time comes an unmistakably Czech film capable of appealing also to foreign audiences'<sup>236</sup> does not indicate that the Czechness had to be compromised in any way. By employing the nostalgic reference of a more internationally successful past, he suggests that even Czechness, when presented well, can interest foreign audiences. However, I would not claim that purity was the main criterion in critics' arguments about the film's value. Instead, notions of purity are only one rhetoric mobilised in the flow of talk. Furthermore, its employment is not necessarily tied only to appreciative arguments. Jiří Peňás, who is critical of the film, also does not deny the film's Czechness. He finds the film to be a 'synthesis of a series of feelings and emotions that can be easily (even too easily) ascribed to the Czech national character, or rather: our perception of this character'.<sup>237</sup> He believes that the film tries to please the national audiences by showing them a flattering image that does not reveal the truth. It therefore seems that notions of truthfulness and authenticity are more important in these evaluations rather than purity. In critical reviews the presented image is a dream,<sup>238</sup> a fairy tale,<sup>239</sup> or 'a photo of Paul Newman claiming [to be] a mirror'.<sup>240</sup> Similarly, positive reviews think that the film reveals 'how sympathetic, sensitive, soulful, sad and compassionate our "Czech soul" is all at the same time',<sup>241</sup> or even that it 'reveals typical, not very flattering features of our national

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<sup>234</sup> Andrej Halada, 'Oscar Kolja Svěrák', *Mladý svět*, 13 (1997), p. 52

<sup>235</sup> Higson, *English Heritage, English Cinema*, p. 6.

<sup>236</sup> Wohlhöffner, 'Laskavé retro Kolja rehabilituje český film'.

<sup>237</sup> Peňás, 'Ekránové sny o sobě samých'.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> Cieslar, 'Kolja'.

<sup>240</sup> Štindl, 'Všude tam, kde je krásně čechoučko', p. 135.

<sup>241</sup> Jan Paulas, 'Kolja', *Katolický týdeník*, 24 (1996), p. 9.

nature'.<sup>242</sup> The vision of Czechness the film was seen to present, and the relation of this vision to 'reality' became important points in debates about *Kolya*.

It is also noteworthy that claims about the film's purity were disappearing from the flow of talk as the film was gathering growing recognition. As *Kolya* travelled around the globe, it was instead increasingly debated along the axis 'international recognition vs. authenticity', with different levels of emphasis placed on each (as well as different notions of authenticity being employed). When the film won the Oscar and therefore reached the 'home base', as some journalists called it, many defenders of the film calmly admitted that perhaps it did intentionally appeal to large publics at home and abroad, but this was completely acceptable since it succeeded in its aim. As one commentator puts it, 'how can something overly try to be liked if it really is liked'.<sup>243</sup> If the film still manages to demonstrate some connection to cultural specificity, some form of a compromise is tolerable for these critics, especially if the film can justify the compromises with tangible evidence of recognition. Peter Hames shows this most clearly, when he evokes the rhetoric of equal rights in his argument, which, as Hjort points out, is central to demands for recognition.<sup>244</sup> In a defence of *Kolya* written a few years later, Hames argues that despite clearly being a product aiming to succeed with international audiences, it does not lose what he calls the 'Czech touch'. According to him, *Kolya*

is no different from most Hollywood products and many other 'European' movies (e.g. *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *The English Patient*). [But] [w]hy should films from small countries be of only parochial interest? Isn't it important that the 'Czech touch' should also reach others? ... *Kolya* is careful to maintain a level [of] irony and authenticity. It is not a sell out.<sup>245</sup>

In this argument, the appeal to international publics is an acceptable compromise, since it allows the nation to demand the attention it deserves under the ideology of equal rights.

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<sup>242</sup> Wohlföhner, 'Laskavé retro Kolja rehabilituje český film'.

<sup>243</sup> Just, 'Kolja nemohl být jiný'.

<sup>244</sup> Hjort, 'Danish Cinema and the Politics of Recognition', p. 527.

<sup>245</sup> Peter Hames, 'Czech Cinema: From State Industry to Competition', *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 42.1-2 (2000), 63-85, pp. 80-81. While Hames's essay was written years after *Kolya*'s release, it reacted to (and was arguably a product of) the concerns and anxieties about Czech cinema explored in this chapter. Hames for example wonders whether trying to produce pure 'national films' is the most suitable strategy for attracting international audiences in the modern world and calls for more state support for Czech film productions.

## Conclusions

In this chapter I looked at how quality and value are negotiated in the flow of talk around *Kolya*. I showed that the values and interpretations circulating around the film before and after its release reveal and were shaped by several concerns about Czech cinema at the time. With the sudden domination of Hollywood productions in Czech cinemas the flow mobilised several definitions of this Other culture that in turn informed ideas about what Czech cinema should be and should not be like. Hollywood is in this flow of talk on the one hand decadent and violent, but also excessive, sentimental as well as beautiful, inspirational and universally appealing. In contrast to this, *Kolya* was constructed as a Czech production first and foremost. It was to demonstrate its Czechness in different ways: by being moving, compassionate, kind and funny but also tasteful, intelligent, modest and not excessive. I also looked at the importance of Zdeněk Svěrák's image for the interpretative strategies of critics and ideas about valuable Czechness. I interpreted the strength of his image in the flow of talk as a symptom of critical concerns about the quality of existing Czech film productions. Svěrák, projecting an image of a writer personifying quintessential Czech values was a significant influence on rooting the film's identity in the traditions of Czech kind comedies. Conversely, his son Jan figured in the flow of talk as a talented and ambitious young director who was keen to show the 'Czech touch' to the outside world.

I also showed how the film's flow of talk mobilised hopes for international recognition. While initially these hopes appeared in reviews merely in the form of nostalgic references to a more artistically productive past of the national cinema, they became an important validator of the film's qualities. As I showed, especially the Oscar in the Foreign Language Film category became used to dismiss the existing concerns about the authenticity and sincerity of the film's Czechness. These arguments indicate that a considerable value was placed on the external recognition of what Peter Hames called 'the Czech touch'. However, *Kolya* remains a rather limited example of 'recognition' achieved by post-communist Czech cinema. While I engaged with Mette Hjort's arguments about the politics of recognition of Danish cinema, in the Czech case I would not claim that the term 'politics' is quite appropriate. Hjort defines politics of recognition as a drive of the state and the industry, 'generated primarily by indifference to the cultural production of small nations'.<sup>246</sup> However, while the prestige of recognition might be alluring to Czech filmmakers, the strategy of leveraging with the goal to appeal to external as well as internal publics has arguably not

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<sup>246</sup> Hjort, 'Danish Cinema and the Politics of Recognition', p. 530.

been adopted widely in Czech cinema. This is probably because many of the anxieties that shaped the flow of talk around *Kolya* have somewhat lost their pertinence. Cinema attendance has somewhat stabilised and the number of films the Czech Union of Film Distributors counts as Czech can now be counted in tens every year, thus refuting the initial concerns that commerce would kill Czech cinema. Furthermore, as I argued in the introduction, Czech films often attract domestic audiences and producers tend to constitute Czech films as primarily for the domestic market. Indeed, the idea of international publics will manifest to a much lesser extent in the debates analysed in the following chapters.

However, if on the one hand targeting international audiences has shown to be less of a necessity for Czech filmmakers, international recognition remains as one of the underlying criteria critics hold for the idea of healthy national cinema. Concerns about the quality of Czech films therefore return continuously in ancillary materials, as the lack of recognition abroad tends to be seen as part of the evidence that these films are simply not of European, let alone world quality. However, as I will argue in the next chapter, the style of filmmaking debated, negotiated, and validated in *Kolya*'s flow of talk remained influential for ideas about what quality Czech production should be like for at least a few years.

## Chapter 2: Cinema Traditions and the Invisible Family Film

In his essay on Czech popular cinema, Pitassio highlights the similarities and continuities in themes and style between socialist and post-socialist films. He observes a series of films (such as *Cosy Dens*, *Pupendo*, *Kolya*, *The Elementary School*) that combine elements of comedy, tragedy, rely on the themes of family and community and offer 'non-divisive' narratives for broad audiences. According to him, these films employ elements that continue to 'maintain a cultural and cinematic heritage that is rooted in popular audiovisual consumption'.<sup>247</sup> According to Pitassio, therefore, these films strongly evoke and rely on the heritage of Czech cinema as popular cinema for broad audiences. I do not question this argument since much of it is reaffirmed in my data. I instead aim to expand on it by focusing on one specific category of film that has received very little attention in the histories of Czech cinema – the family film.

While representations of family in Czech cinema have gathered some attention,<sup>248</sup> analysing films as addressing and targeting a family audience has been a less common approach to the study of Czech cinema. I will approach this topic through an analysis of promotion and reception of one specific film, *Cosy Dens*. Released in April 1999, *Cosy Dens* climbed to the top of the annual box office list and sold more than twice as many tickets as *The Mummy* (Stephen Sommers, 1999) in second place.<sup>249</sup> The central argument of the chapter is that the film's promotion and reception in mainstream press centred heavily on the theme of family and the variety of pleasures the film was to offer to a broad audience. The argument of this analysis is that these critics draw the image of Czech cinema as popular, welcoming to broad audiences. This analysis is then followed by a section on the interpretative frameworks employed by critics writing for more specialised publications. I will demonstrate that writers from these publications often distance themselves from the pleasures of popular Czech cinema and reject them as a purely ideological product. As has been the case throughout this thesis, the aim is not to invalidate the interpretations of any taste formation, but instead explore the existing tendencies in writing about Czech cinema

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<sup>247</sup> Pitassio, 'Popular Nostalgia', p. 221.

<sup>248</sup> For example in Ewa Mazierska, *Masculinities in Polish, Czech and Slovak Cinema: Black Peters and Men of Marble* (New York; Oxford: Bergham Books, 2008), or Čulík, *Jací sme*.

<sup>249</sup> Unie filmových distributor, *TOP 50 - roční výsledky*, 30 August 2010, available at: <<https://www.ufd.cz/prehledy-statistiky/top-50-rocni-vysledky?page=1>> [accessed 6 July 2020].



as a process in which 'the tastes of certain groups are rejected and the tastes of others acquire authority'.<sup>250</sup>

Since the category of the family film has rarely been acknowledged and explored in histories of Czech cinema, I will draw on some ideas emerging in studies of Hollywood films. It is not the goal to base my argument on the assumption that Hollywood and Czech family film are virtually the same. There are, of course, issues with trying to compare the outputs of two industries that have historically been seen as diametrically different. However, the aim is instead to open the discussion about Czech family film that goes beyond simple dismissal of it as a mere product of ideology that does not deserve further critical exploration, and a step in this direction has been taken in studies of Hollywood family films.

The existing literature on the family film often points out that it is less of 'genre in traditional sense'.<sup>251</sup> This is because the term can be usefully applied to a range of films of different genres – science fiction, action-adventure, fantasy, comedy, the list could go on. Instead, Robert Allen calls the family film a 'discursive marker for a set of narrative, representational and institutional practices designed to maximise marketability and profitability ... by means of what we might call cross-generational appeal'.<sup>252</sup> Similarly, Noel Brown approaches the family film as a 'master-genre' that 'cannot communicate such detail as plot, location, theme or character'.<sup>253</sup> He places emphasis on the emotional aspects and pleasures the family film promises. According to him, it is a type of film that responds 'at one end of the scale, to cultural requirements for optimistic, comforting narratives that provide reassurance and reaffirm often conservative social values; and at the other, to innate desires for spectacle, escapism and release from everyday pressures and anxieties'.<sup>254</sup> I find this concept of the family film as a 'master-genre' promising comfort and escapism to a cross-generational audience a useful way to approach the debates emerging in the mainstream press around the release of *Cosy Dens*. As I will demonstrate, notions of comfort and escapism are important parts of the film's attractions indicated in promotion and of some critics' notions of quality.

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<sup>250</sup> Willis, 'Cultural Studies and Popular Film', p. 189.

<sup>251</sup> Robert C. Allen, 'Home Alone Together: Hollywood and the Family Film', in *Identifying Hollywood's Audiences: Cultural Identity and the Movies*, ed. by Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby (London: British Film Institute, 1999), pp. 109-131 (p. 114).

<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

<sup>253</sup> Noel Brown, 'The "Family" Film and the Tensions Between Popular and Academic Interpretations of Genre,' *Trespassing Journal*, 2 (2013), 22-35, p. 30.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

In the first section of the chapter I will look at the strategies that constructed the 'family film' identity in the promotional campaign of *Cosy Dens*. These strategies include promising a cross-generational appeal and highlighting a variety of comforting pleasures for audiences of different preferences. I will then move on to analysing the film's reception mainly (although not exclusively) in mainstream publications. Many mainstream critics describe the film in ways that often seem to aim to highlight 'multiple avenues of access' to the film.<sup>255</sup> In fact, I will argue that mainstream critics favourable of the film construct the film's value around notions of comfort and broad appeal. We will therefore see below that critics, while pinpointing various pleasures, create hierarchies, with some elements being accepted as appropriate and valuable while others are excluded from this pantheon if deemed as potentially disrupting the comforting pleasures of the film. Critics for example often find value in the film's depictions of the family environment. In their reviews they repeatedly draw a figure of an imaginary audience (their reader) who comes to enjoy the film's pleasures. This imaginary audience returns to youth by identifying with the adolescent character but through this nostalgic identification also learns to come to terms with their assumed new role as a parent. *Cosy Dens* is therefore validated in several reviews as an 'occasion to contemplate one's place in familial networks, past and present', which Peter Krämer finds to be a prominent part of the pleasures offered by the family film.<sup>256</sup> On the other hand, I will look at the theme of history and politics as dangerous to the promise of comfort and escapism and the ways in which these threatening elements are 'neutralised' in reviews. In the next section of this chapter I will show that to describe these pleasures and qualities, critics resort to a set of consistent terms that were present in reviews of both *Cosy Dens* and *Kolya*. These terms strongly recall the interpretative frameworks Bláhová found to have stabilised in foreign reception of *Closely Watched Trains* in the sixties: mix of comedy, tragedy, the ordinary man, kindness. Indeed, I will demonstrate that the film's qualities are commonly validated through indications of their place in notions of cinema traditions.

In the last section I turn to articles and publications making claims to more refined tastes. As I will demonstrate, this strand of criticism tends to use different evaluative strategies; it places the film's capacity to comment on the society and disrupt the audience's sense of comfort at the centre. I analyse these discourses in the reception of *Cosy Dens* around the time of its release but also as a particular tendency in writing about popular Czech cinema in serious publications. Furthermore, I look at how claims to higher taste formations

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<sup>255</sup> Klinger, 'Digressions at the Cinema', p. 10.

<sup>256</sup> Krämer, 'Would You Take Your Child to See This Film?', p. 305.

are often accompanied by dismissing lower forms of representation as well as lower tastes. I look especially at one particular approach to Czech popular cinema that dismisses comforting pleasures as traces of the old socialist ideology that through entertainment strived to turn the population into an unquestioning herd of consumers. My argument is that it is especially the commonality of these arguments and evaluative strategies in struggles for distinction that have not allowed closer analysis of the category of the family film and popular Czech cinema more thoroughly.

First, however, I want to look at the promotional campaign of *Cosy Dens* and the emphasis on pleasures of warmth and familiarity in constructing the film's promises of cross-generational appeal.

### Selling the Family Film

As Noel Brown points out, '[a]ddressing the "family audience" is a matter of commercial pragmatism'.<sup>257</sup> The family film attempts to attract a broad, diverse spectatorship and therefore assure high returns. He also notes that family films are not necessarily enjoyed and attended only by family audiences; instead, the 'family' is a rhetoric that endows the film with an aura of relevance. As he says, 'producers of such films employ a range of textual and non-textual strategies in an effort to engage mass audiences, under the cloak of intimacy and respectability offered by the "family" label'.<sup>258</sup> In the case of *Cosy Dens*, terms evoking the intimacy of the family environment formed an important part in the network of identities introduced before the film's release. In one interview the director presents the impetus for the film as coming from personal interests, while also imbuing the family theme with a 'community-building' quality:

Me and scriptwriter Peter Jarchovský have always been interested in different family stories and rituals. Showing real ... traumas and embarrassments from childhood and adolescence doesn't cease to fascinate us. It helps us feel affiliated with other, similarly affected people. We want to mediate situations to audiences that they themselves had a chance to experience.<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> Noel Brown, *The Children's Film: Genre, Narration and Narrative* (London; New York: Wallflower, 2017), p. 35.

<sup>258</sup> Noel Brown, *The Hollywood Family Film: A History, from Shirley Temple to Harry Potter* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012), p. 20.

<sup>259</sup> Jakub Lederer, 'Vyprávění trapasů mě stále fascinuje, říká Jan Hřebejk,' *ZN Zemské noviny*, 10 August 1998, p. 7.

As Klinger points out, turning the subject matter of a film into an attraction involves encouraging the audiences to locate it 'in relation to their own lives under the category of "relevance"'.<sup>260</sup> The relevance the director constructs in the quote above uses recognisability and familiarity as the main appeals. At the same time, however, he promises that the audience will experience a sense of comfort and pleasure from observing these familiar situations on screen.

Indeed, the focus on familiarity and recognisable situations can be discerned from the structure of the film itself. *Cosy Dens* does not have a central storyline in which a protagonist (or a group of them) would pursue a singular goal. Instead, many characters have their own stories and journeys which are built around environments and themes such as school, home, friends, teenage crushes, and family festivities. The film tells the story of two families, the Šebeks and the Kraus, whose paths are intertwined in several ways – they live in the same building in which most of the film takes places. Every now and then Mrs Šebková (Simona Stašová) is also visited by her sister, teacher Eva (Eva Holubová) and her son Peter (Marek Javorský). In one narrative line, teenager Michal (Michael Beran), who is also the narrator of the film, is in love with the neighbour Jindřiška (Kristýna Nováková) and tries to vie for her attention. Jindra, however, keeps resisting his advances since she is in love with Elien (Ondřej Brousek). Both Michal and Jindra also have to deal with their fathers who are controlling and uncompromising (Ewa Mazierska places them in the trend of 'poisonous fathers' in Czech and Polish cinemas<sup>261</sup>). This is all set during the months of the Prague Spring, a period of increased liberalisation in the politics of the Communist government until it was forcefully stopped by the invasion of the Warsaw Pact armies in August 1968. The fathers of the two families are on the opposing sides of the political spectrum. On the one hand there is Mr Šebek (Michal's father, played by Miroslav Donutil) who is an army officer and a devoted follower of the Communist regime. Jindřiška's father (Jiří Kodet), on the other hand, is a war hero and nationalist with a great dislike for the socialist regime.

This narrative with an ensemble of characters with different goals might be the result of the initial plans of the producers to develop a TV miniseries, which was eventually shortened into a two-hour film. However, giving space to such a variety of characters in this way also indicates the film's intention to address a cross-generational audience. This is what the official synopsis of the film suggests as well. It describes the film as a 'story of one

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<sup>260</sup> Klinger, 'Digressions at the Cinema: Reception and Mass Culture', p. 13.

<sup>261</sup> Ewa Mazierska, *Masculinities in Polish, Czech and Slovak Cinema: Black Peters and Men of Marble* (New York; Oxford: Bergham Books, 2008), pp 127-128.

historical generation – ageing parents and growing up adolescents and small children’ giving thus an indication of the different types of address the film aims to combine. A very common description found in the press around the film’s release referred to the film as a ‘mosaic-tale of parallel life-stories of three generations’. It is fitting that the producers decided to compare their film to a mosaic, an art form that literally depends on countless small pieces being put together to create an image. It demonstrates the filmmakers’ attempt to construct *Cosy Dens* as what Austin calls a ‘dispersible text’, a film that through ‘fragmentation, elaboration and diffusion’ offers multiple avenues of access to groups of different preferences in order to maximise audiences.<sup>262</sup> Just as countless smaller pieces construct the basis of a mosaic, *Cosy Dens* is also built from different pieces in the hope that the audiences of different ages will find that one piece appealing to them.

The filmmakers themselves were willing to occasionally openly admit their aim to address cross-generational audiences. In one article, tellingly titled ‘Film *Cosy Dens* wants to entertain all generations’ and published in the daily newspaper *Mladá fronta Dnes* one day before the film’s official release, overjoyed director reports positive results from a test screening.<sup>263</sup> Reaffirming the assumption that different demographics have different preferences, we find out that ‘teenagers are thrilled especially about the first half of the film. They say they know exactly these situations from home; they just see it as a comedy and August 1968 wouldn’t have to be here. While our older generation experiences the second half more [strongly]’.<sup>264</sup> The director here makes an attempt to make sense of audience preferences, and he uses his ‘findings’ to present the film as appealing across different taste differentials. While he also refers to another taste differential, that of genre preferences (comedy vs historical topic), in this article he constructs the audience mainly around the axis of age, suggesting that several age groups will find something to enjoy.

Of course, not all attractions dispersed in ancillary materials before the release of *Cosy Dens* were neatly labelled as intended for a specific age group. However, they often continued to reaffirm the goal to offer a comforting experience for a diverse audience. Ancillary materials picked and elaborated different elements of the film into numerous ‘consumable identities’.<sup>265</sup> In several articles, for example, the cast and crew talk about the film’s mise-en-scène, or cinematography. What connects these stories from the set is that

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<sup>262</sup> Austin, *Hollywood, Hype and Audiences*, p. 29.

<sup>263</sup> Mirka Spáčilová, ‘Film Pelíšky chce pobavit všechny generace’, *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 7 April 1999, p. 19.

<sup>264</sup> Jan Hřebejk quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>265</sup> Klinger, ‘Digressions at the Cinema’, p. 9.

they often rely on terms that construct images of familiarity and warmth. In one article the director discusses the intended colour palette of the film. He promises that the film uses 'warm colours of ochre and bricks' that will help to maintain the film's 'sun-drenched impressionistic atmosphere'.<sup>266</sup>

The historical setting was also utilised in promotion as a source of different attractions. Specifically, the visual qualities of objects presented in *Cosy Dens* were invited to be gazed upon. In his seminal essay on British heritage film Andrew Higson brings attention to the tendency of these films to present the period they are set in as 'visually spectacular pastiche, inviting a nostalgic gaze', celebrating a more glorious past of the nation.<sup>267</sup> However, in the case of *Cosy Dens*, the attractiveness of period objects is meant to derive more from their familiarity rather than visual splendour. The interior design and fashion of the socialist period are rarely recognised in public consciousness for their aesthetic qualities, quite the opposite. However, the lack of variety in common commodities resulted that large proportion of the population had the same objects in their households. In her work on contemporary representations of socialism in Czech cinema and television Veronika Pehe therefore prefers to use term 'retro' rather than 'nostalgia'. According to her, the former term is better used to refer to evocations of the past that do not rely on espousing sentimentality and longing in the way the word nostalgia connotes.<sup>268</sup> In line with this idea of retro, the film poster for *Cosy Dens* was an image of a single white plastic spoon accompanied by the title of the film written in retro-style typeface. On the one hand the plastic spoon signalled tackiness and outdatedness. For example, in one comic scene of the film Mr Šebek gifts plastic spoons to the newly-weds Mr Kraus and Mrs Šebková's sister. However, as all guests put the spoons in their cups of hot coffee, they watch the spoons to soften and melt. The spoons are a source of comedy in the film. At the same time, however, they also presented an image of a familiar object audiences could recognise from their households.

The historical topic posed a potential source of a wide variety of attractions that went beyond the film's mise-en-scène. On the one hand ancillary materials highlighted the

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<sup>266</sup> Martin Stepanov, 'Retrokomedie Pelíšky přinesla herci Donutilovi „povýšení“', *Lidové noviny*, 6 September 1998, p. 12.

<sup>267</sup> Andrew Higson, 'Re-presenting the National Past: Nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film', in *Film Genre Reader* (4th ed.), ed. by Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas, 2012), pp. 602-627 (p. 602) (first publ. in *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism*, ed. by Lester D. Friedman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 109-129).

<sup>268</sup> Veronika Pehe, 'The Colours of Socialism: Visual Nostalgia and Retro Aesthetics in Czech Film and Television', *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 57.3-4 (2015), 239-253.

authenticity of period objects. For example, one article details the troubles the crew went into in order to find authentic furniture and props. Even actors and staff themselves are reported to having brought in their own clothes or furniture inherited after grandparents.<sup>269</sup> This focus on authenticity also included the depiction of situations and reactions of characters to historical developments in the film. Since the director was born in 1967, he assured potential viewers on numerous occasions that he listened to actors and their memories of the period in order to depict the historical period faithfully. The film's closing sequence in which the armies of the Warsaw Pact invade Czechoslovakia was especially highlighted as being 'pieced together from memories of actors'.<sup>270</sup> Memories of cast and crew here seem to have an authenticating function, assuring that the events and tone of the film follows some notions of historical truthfulness. There was therefore a certain dedication in the ancillary materials to utilising the attractions the past offers.

The promotional campaign had a rather ambivalent position towards the film's historical topic, however. While on the one hand it was a source of pleasures, the focus on the past was to remain rather selective. Specifically, there were attempts to downplay the 'Historical' aspects of the theme. In one interview in which the director describes the subject matter of the film, he makes sure, again, to stress the family environment of the film: '*Cosy Dens* contains what amuses and touches us'.<sup>271</sup> And those are things outside big politics; generally understandable family situations and rituals, Christmases, weddings, funerals'.<sup>272</sup> It is safe to assume that what the director refers to as 'big politics' here is the political events taking place in the background behind the film's family setting – political reforms that were eventually forcefully ended with the invasion in 1968. It is an attempt to evoke certain expectations and to dissociate the film from the label of 'historical film' which tends to be commonly differentiated from other films set in the past by its focus on 'historical events' and 'real historical persons'.<sup>273</sup> Even in the above-mentioned example in which the director described his aim to faithfully represent the invasion of 1968 by consulting actors, actors are used as stand-ins for 'ordinary people' as opposed to people in power making political decisions. The topic of 'big politics' and the label of historical film is treated as potentially alienating to audiences and needs to be contained. It is treated as somewhat uninteresting,

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<sup>269</sup> Spáčilová, 'Film Pelíšky chce pobavit všechny generace'.

<sup>270</sup> Ivan Truhlička, 'V Pelíšcích mám nejraději smutné věci, říká Jan Hřebejk', *Mladá Fronta Dnes*, 28 April 1999.

<sup>271</sup> Emphasis added but is implied in the original text by the sentence's word order.

<sup>272</sup> Spáčilová, 'Film Pelíšky chce pobavit všechny generace'.

<sup>273</sup> See for example 'Introduction' in James Chapman, *Past and Present: National Identity and the British Historical Film* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2005).

even difficult, in contrast to the 'generally understandable' family everyday situations. As Brown says, 'uplifting narratives are not the exclusive province of the family film but the attempt to unify pluralistic audiences imposes further specifications of a more formal nature: the need to avoid situations and themes that may cause offence'.<sup>274</sup> While Brown gives lack of swearing, sexual explicitness and violence as examples of such themes, the promotion of *Cosy Dens* puts mainly certain aspects of history into this category of potentially alienating elements.

This section served mainly to show how *Cosy Dens* was established in the pre-release publicity as a family film. I looked especially at the variety of strategies that served to construct the film as a comforting experience for a cross-generational audience. The family environment of the film was an important element used for this purpose. On the one hand, it was used as a reservoir of storylines that could resonate with audiences of different ages. At the same time, it allowed the exploitation of the retro elements of the film by highlighting the visual aspects of everyday objects. The family setting was also utilised as a more enjoyable and relatable alternative to 'big themes' such as politics. I will return to the issue of history as a theme that needs to be escaped from later in the chapter in my analysis of the film's critical reception.

### Family Comfort in Popular Taste Formation

In this section I will now analyse the ways mainstream critics describe the family theme of the film. I will demonstrate that many critics focused on the family theme as a key criterion for the film's value in their reviews. In their evaluations they elevate it by presenting an array of pleasures that they place under the label of 'acceptable'. One of the pleasures that critics often indicated was a nostalgic return to adolescence. I will argue that in order to justify this pleasure, they portray *Cosy Dens* as a film that performs a kind of 'social work' on adults in the audience.<sup>275</sup>

On the one hand it is apparent that critics ascribed to Horton's idea of the family film as one that 'holds the family up as an ideal form'.<sup>276</sup> However, this does not quite sufficiently encompass the way critics present the family environment in their reviews. If we were to

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<sup>274</sup> Brown, *The Hollywood Family Film*, p. 30.

<sup>275</sup> Krämer, 'Would You Take Your Child to See This Film?', p. 295.

<sup>276</sup> Andrew Horton, 'Is It a Wonderful Life?: Families and Laughter in American Film Comedies', in *A Family Affair: Cinema Calls Home*, ed. by Murray Pomerance (London; New York: Wallflower, 2008), pp. 45-60 (p. 51).



give an adjective to the picture critics draw in their descriptions, anarchistic and absurd would be more suitable. As Horton says, some 'cinematic family comedies can celebrate a rather anarchistic sense of family, where little possibility of compromise seems to exist and a challenge is being mounted to what we take to be the natural order'.<sup>277</sup> Indeed, several critics saw *Cosy Dens* as such a film. Consider, for instance, this opening paragraph of one review: 'It's winter 1967, Mr Šebek is writing up dinner menu, his son is just hanging himself in the garden gazebo and Mr Kraus is shouting from his balcony that he's giving the Bolsheviks one year... two max. This is how retro-comedy *Cosy Dens* starts'.<sup>278</sup> By selecting these specific moments to describe the film's premise and presenting them as if they were taking place at the same time, the critic constructs a somewhat absurd image. In fact, it could be argued that the film itself presents the sequence in a slightly calmer manner. All the moments the critic describes take place in the first four minutes of the film and are underlined by the protagonist's melancholic voice-over and slow non-diegetic string music. Mr Kraus does not really shout his opinion from the balcony in this scene but states it calmly with a cigarette in his hand after seeing Mr Šebek's Russian relatives drive off (although he does shout in many other scenes of the film). The scenes described are also separated by a credits sequence that consists of shots of snow-covered Prague neighbourhood, accompanied by Václav Neckář's song *Tu kytaru jsem koupil kvůli tobě* (1965), which further support the melancholic mood of the scene. I do not wish to accuse the critic of misreading the film or misinforming her readers, instead I see the description as part of the critic's aim to give the reader an idea about the film, help to set expectations and indicate certain pleasures. In this case (as well as in other reviews) the idea of absurdity of the family environment seemed to be important to the critic.

Contrary to Horton's statement that family comedies present 'a challenge ... to what we take to be the natural order', in reviews of *Cosy Dens* this chaos and anarchy are taken to *be* the natural order of family. Critics describe the absurd environment as belonging to everyday family experience. Another critic presents a similarly absurd image of the film in the introduction to his review:

You have surely experienced it at least once. A nervous atmosphere is presiding at home, the head of the family is upset because of something trivial, mummy is making sure "she hasn't overcooked the dumplings", neighbours one floor below

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<sup>277</sup> Ibid., pp. 48-49.

<sup>278</sup> Petra Dominková, 'V rodinných Pelíšcích býva někdy veselo a někdy truchlivo', *Lidové noviny*, 10 April 1999.

are fighting hysterically. Enough to drive one crazy, only a total phlegmatic can survive this without traces on mental health. This is exactly the environment that also forms the personalities of the protagonists of new Czech film from director Jan Hřebejk, *Cosy Dens*.<sup>279</sup>

Again, the critic picks disjointed events from the film to create an image of a chaotic family environment. The critic even goes as far as to suggest that this environment is harmful to one's mental health. However, this absurdity is implied to be part of the film's pleasures because it is recognisable to the imaginary audience. As this critic continues, 'the director sets up a series of comedy gags and various absurd situations. The viewer will find the majority of them entertaining, mainly because with their simple form they set a mirror to his own experiences'.<sup>280</sup> These absurd situations were again simply enjoyable mainly because of their seeming familiarity.

The chaotic family environments in the film were therefore on the one hand highlighted in reviews as relatable and familiar. Moreover, not only are these situations presented as recognisable, but they also offer the opportunity to travel in time. It is, for example, interesting to consider the points of identification critics suggest in their descriptions of the film. In the review above it is notable that the critic references father and 'mummy' (and neighbours) as contributing to the family chaos, but the behaviour of children does not seem to figure in it. Instead, the critic implicitly identifies with the child annoyed by father's tirades over 'something trivial'. In fact, in reviews of *Cosy Dens* critics often seem to place themselves into the position of children who are annoyed by the behaviour of their parents. Consequently, this return to childhood is often presented in reviews as one of the attractions of the film.

Indeed, it can be argued that, despite the ensemble of characters the film focuses on, it is the teenage characters who are placed into the roles of protagonists (especially Michal, with his power to frame the film with his voice-over). However, critics indicate that there is also a specific value arising from the experience of seeing these familiar absurd situations unfold in the film from a child's perspective. By returning to the perspective of children, the imaginary audiences critics construct are encouraged to learn to accept their

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<sup>279</sup> Jakub Lederer, 'Hřebejkovy Pelíšky nabízejí nostalgické ohlédnutí za totalitní minlostí,' *Slovo*, 8 April 1999, p. 7.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid.

changing position in the familial unit. One critic describes the film's strong moments in the following way:

The most outstanding situations are those in which families come together, especially Christmas holidays. If you had to play the piano for your relatives as a defenceless child on Christmas Eve, if you had to marvel compulsorily at father's impossible presents, if you had to assist your parents' attempts to 'be fun' or when they 'try to be young', then the humour of *Cosy Dens* will get under your skin in that rare way when nostalgia and forgotten feelings, for which we, now perhaps ourselves in the position of parents, feel ashamed of, creep into the laughter.<sup>281</sup>

It has been pointed out that Hollywood family films commonly highlight the importance of communication in the family. Andrew Horton describes American family comedies as films about 'learning the art of compromise so that family members with very different personalities or goals can get along together'.<sup>282</sup> The vast amount of literature on family films produced in the last three decades analyses families in film as reflecting the broader phenomenon of 'family in crisis'. The father especially is quite often a source of pain in Hollywood films – estranged due to lack of communication or missing completely. Peter Krämer interprets family adventure films as being imbued with attempts to come to terms with missing fathers. By extension, the films attempt to help the members of the audience to come to terms with the pain as well. He argues that the 'cultural work that the films' narratives perform to reconcile family members with each other on the screen translates into a kind of social work performed by the films on the familial units in the auditorium'.<sup>283</sup> Krämer's description of the family film as an 'occasion to contemplate one's place in familial networks, past and present'<sup>284</sup> seems very fitting in relation to the review quoted above, since the critic describes such contemplation as one of the standout moments in the experience of watching the film. This nostalgic experience is presented as allowing the adult spectator to reflect on their present role as an adult. The critic above describes an audience member who has forgotten 'what it was like' being a child and is now perhaps facing the

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<sup>281</sup> Věra Míšková, 'Humor filmových Pelíšků zalézá až pod kůži,' *Právo*, 9 April 1999, p. 12.

<sup>282</sup> Horton, 'Is It a Wonderful Life?', p. 48.

<sup>283</sup> Krämer, 'Would You Take Your Child to See This Film?', p. 295. See also Sarah Harwood, *Family Fictions: Representations of the Family in 1980s Hollywood Cinema* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997) or Yvonne Tasker, 'The Family in Action,' in *Film Genre Reader* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.), ed. by Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas, 2012), pp. 524-542 (first publ. in *Action and Adventure*, ed. by Yvonne Tasker (London; New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 252-266).

<sup>284</sup> Krämer, 'Would You Take Your Child to See This Film?', p. 305.

chaos and intergenerational conflicts in their new role as a parent. Watching *Cosy Dens* is therefore indicated to involve a learning experience, a process of reflection that is meant to help the spectator accept their role in the familial network and a comforting reassurance that conflicts in the family are normal. Furthermore, by identifying with the child characters, the audience member is implied to leave the auditorium with a greater understanding of the child's perspective on the family and its members. Whether any audiences actually left the auditorium with such experiences is a completely different matter, of course. It is instead the strategies relied on in the critic's act of validation that interest us here, however.

So far, I have looked at the attributes that critics highlighted as valuable in the film. In the variety of pleasures that critics endowed with positive characteristics, there was one especially that was not given that privilege, however. In the first section I briefly discussed how the family theme is emphasised at the expense of political and historical themes. Specifically, it was 'big politics' that the producers seemed to have perceived as potentially alienating to some audiences and made efforts to distance their film from this theme. In a similar vein, several reviews constructed the film's value by contrasting the family theme to 'big history' taking place in the background. One critic, for instance, notices that characters of the film live their lives 'independent[ly] from "big" history'.<sup>285</sup> Instead, he describes the film as one where the 'small dramas', as he calls them, of everyday family life have more significance. These 'Small dramas of opinions and relationships that take place every now and then in the privacy of family cosy dens will probably engrave in the memory of their participants for ever'.<sup>286</sup> The family environment is again elevated as an ultimately important theme and implied to be even more memorable than 'history'.

Furthermore, whenever critics admit the presence of history in the film, it is described as a rather 'tricky' part. It required 'special care' and needed to remain 'cool' and 'neutral' in opposition to the emotional resonance of the family topic. In one review a critic praises the film for managing to depict the Invasion of Czechoslovakia 'proudly ... but without silly pathos'.<sup>287</sup> Another critic values the film's depiction of the period 'mainly because it is devoid of pointlessly political and propagandistic slogans. The authors don't judge the political climate but present it for reflection'.<sup>288</sup> This critic presents the historical topic as if it

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<sup>285</sup> Otto Vejnar, 'Hřebejkovy Pelíšky uvádí tento týden Sněžník Děčín a Kinoklub Varnsdorf', *Děčínský deník*, 25 May 1999, p. 9.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid.

<sup>287</sup> Andrej Halada, 'Další dobrý český film', *Mladý svět*, 18 (1999), p. 37.

<sup>288</sup> Anon., 'Příběh mezi slzami a smíchem', *Hospodářské noviny*, 9 April 1999, supplement Na víkend, p. 11.

were in danger of being exploited for particular political agendas; it therefore needs to remain 'neutral' and 'impartial'. The historical topic was at best a background subordinated to the 'more resonating' family stories and potentially a disruptive presence at odds with the film's comforting pleasures.

We could say that the efforts to 'neutralise' the political aspects of the film were motivated by the socio-political contexts of the time critics wrote their reviews in. After 1989 the issue of denouncement and punishment of 'those responsible' for the crimes of the communist regime became an important topic of discussion. However, as Françoise Meyer points out, 'after 1989 it was much more difficult to clearly separate perpetrators from victims and losers from the winners than after the fall of Nazism'.<sup>289</sup> President Václav Havel emphasised in his 1990 New Year's speech that the question of blame is not easily shifted to a small group of people. He reiterates the idea that everyone had their guilt by passively obeying the regime and contributing to its continued existence: 'we are all – though naturally to differing extents – responsible for the operation of the totalitarian machinery. None of us is just its victim. We are all also its co-creators'.<sup>290</sup> It can therefore be argued that the familial pleasures critics emphasised at the expense of the historical theme also served the purpose of escape from the blame that was being sought outside the auditorium. One critic expresses this sentiment especially well: '*Cosy Dens* simply doesn't judge anyone, especially not that majority of the nation that collaborated with any regime one way or another. Everyone has a right for their warm "cosy den"'.<sup>291</sup> Similarly, in a review published in the more specialised magazine *Film a doba*, Alena Prokopová indicates that the film's evocation of family comfort is a recognisable feature: 'Family was and has been an environment and a phenomenon in Czech cinema and Czech reality that needs to be fortified and defended from attacks of outside reality. "Big history" therefore intentionally and thoroughly remains outside; outside the doors of cosy family "dens"'.<sup>292</sup> Prokopová finds the film to rely on escapist elements that are built on the family theme and the film's setting in the past. As she says, '*Cosy Dens* is about finding an escape space in actually never existing old gold days, into which we can collectively project a desire for a harmonic and lucid present'.<sup>293</sup> Similarly, according to her, in its aim to target 'the broadest audience' the film is kind to all characters and avoids

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<sup>289</sup> Françoise Mayer, *Češi a jejich komunismus: Paměť a politická identita*, transl. by Helena Beguivinová (Prague: Argo, 2009), p. 74.

<sup>290</sup> Václav Havel, 'Havel's New Year's Address to the Nation, 1990', *Making the History of 1989*, Item #111, available at: <<http://chnm.gmu.edu/1989/items/show/111>> [accessed 5 July 2020].

<sup>291</sup> Barbora Chvojková, 'Obrázková knížka let šedesátých', *Týden*, 12 April 1999, p. 63.

<sup>292</sup> Alena Prokopová, 'Rodinné pelíšky', *Film a doba*, 45.2 (1999), 94-6, p. 95.

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

exploring the issue of historical guilt.<sup>294</sup> She admits that this poses a problem if one attempts to see *Cosy Dens* as a 'realistic' depiction of the past rather than a 'professionally done idyllic journey into a period that didn't exist until Hřebejk "discovered" it in his private gold-pink time machine'.<sup>295</sup> However, this does not stand in the way of enjoyment. As she closes her review, 'Dangerous? Perhaps... but very pleasant!'.<sup>296</sup> One of the pleasures that figured in the construction of value of *Cosy Dens* in the press was therefore a relief from contemporary pressure to deal with questions regarding the communist past.

### Comedy Traditions in Reception

So far, I have looked at the ways the family theme was highlighted in reception of *Cosy Dens* as a source of several pleasures. First, the theme served as a demonstration of relatable situations the audience was to be familiar with from their own lives. Second, these situations were indicated to offer an opportunity to return to childhood and come to terms with one's changing position in the family. I also argued that the emphasis on the family theme was indicated to provide an escape from political and historical questions circulating in media discourses at the time. However, as Prokopová's review analysed above indicates, the focus on family at the expense of historical events has its own place in the history of Czech cinema. As she says, 'Family was and has been an environment and a phenomenon in Czech cinema and Czech reality that needs to be fortified and defended from attacks of outside reality'<sup>297</sup>. Indeed, Mazierksa argues that the family theme became a prominent area explored by Czech and Slovak filmmakers during the normalisation period. As she says,

This was partly due to heavier censorship, which prevented filmmakers from dealing openly with contentious political subjects, and partly to the character of life during this period, when the vast majority of Czechs and Slovaks withdrew from political and indeed, any communal life into the private space of their houses as the only place to be sheltered from state.<sup>298</sup>

The emphasis in ancillary materials on the escapist pleasures through explorations of family relationships therefore seems to have a resonance with ideas of Czech cinema traditions.

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<sup>294</sup> Ibid., p. 95-96.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid., p. 95

<sup>298</sup> Mazierska, *Masculinities in Polish, Czech and Slovak Cinema*, p. 110.

Similar connections to Czech cinema traditions in ancillary materials were being created in descriptions of the film's tone, especially through emphasising elements of comedy, tragedy and kindness. While, as I indicated above, one of the identities developed in ancillary materials for *Cosy Dens* was 'comedy', ancillary materials strived to emphasise that it is not 'just' a comedy. In one article, the director states that he even prefers 'the sadder moments' of the film.<sup>299</sup> Critics similarly continued to emphasise a wider range of emotional responses the film was trying to evoke. For instance, for many critics it was important to point out that there are serious moments in the film. One critic finds the film to be 'a great film full of humour, poetry and chilling absurdity'.<sup>300</sup> Another critic thinks that 'While the first half constitutes mainly a pure comedy, gradually sadder tones emerge'.<sup>301</sup> In a very similar way, another critic agrees that 'First the audience is mainly having fun.... But sometimes ... death enters the house, wedding festivities, which are meant to connect politically irreconcilable houses end with a hangover from the occupation. And everyone's worlds fall apart'.<sup>302</sup> Some critics even incorporated this generic mix into the titles of their reviews, with one critic naming his review 'Story between tears and laughter'<sup>303</sup> and another '*Cosy Dens* is sometimes cheerful and sometimes tearful'.<sup>304</sup>

To some extent, it can be argued that this focus on multiple emotional responses is part of a critic's self-conscious participation in the flow of talk around film. As Barker argues, ancillary materials such reviews, publicity articles, interviews, press kits, 'together ... constitute more or less patterned discursive preparations for the act of viewing'.<sup>305</sup> Importantly, therefore, reviews themselves also have a 'prefigurative' function as they participate in the process in which audiences form expectations about films.<sup>306</sup> In addressing a large audience, critics writing for mainstream press highlight the multiplicity of pleasures or rather multiple avenues of access not dissimilar from promotional materials.<sup>307</sup> The result of this attempt to point to the variety of different pleasures in the film is criticism that is sometimes accompanied by high levels of description. In mainstream daily newspapers such as *Mladá Fronta Dnes* or *Lidové noviny*, the reviews become devoid of almost any arguments (usually associated with 'serious' writing) and do not go far beyond descriptions and

<sup>299</sup> Truhlička, 'V Pelíšcích mám nejraději smutné věci, říká Jan Hřebejk'.

<sup>300</sup> Jiří Varhaník, 'Hřebejkovy Pelíšky mají atmosférou doby', *Jihlavské listy*, 25 May 1999, p. 5.

<sup>301</sup> Halada, 'Další dobrý český film'.

<sup>302</sup> Mirka Spáčilová, 'Kronika rodičů a dětí se povedla', *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 9 April 1999, p. 15.

<sup>303</sup> Anon., 'Příběh mezi slzami a smíchem'.

<sup>304</sup> Míšková, 'Humor filmových Pelíšků zalézal až pod kůži'.

<sup>305</sup> Barker, 'News, Reviews, Clues, Interviews and Other Ancillary Materials', p. 3.

<sup>306</sup> Ibid.

<sup>307</sup> See also Austin, *Hollywood, Hype and Audiences*.

indications of the different pleasures the film offers. However, despite this, the reviews still aim to place the film in perceptions of cultural value. One review published in one of the most read daily newspapers concludes that *Cosy Dens* is 'a very tastefully shot picture [that] is very well cast and can be expected to be warmly received by all generations'.<sup>308</sup> It is hard to discern from this review what makes the film 'tastefully shot' – the review, despite being over 500 words long, offers little more than a description of the film's various elements, even revealing that Jindřiška's mother (Emília Vášáryová) dies in the film. It is safe to assume, however, that central to the tastefulness the critic describes is a certain ideal balance between the wide variety of pleasures for a broad audience. The critic concludes in the end that *Cosy Dens* is a 'cultured film that mixes humour, gags and sadness'.<sup>309</sup> Similarly, the spoiling of Vilma's death also appears to be motivated by the critic's urge to provide evidence that the film is not 'all just fun' but that there are serious moments that counterbalance the moments of comedy.

Indeed, as Bláhová argues, a blend of elements of comedy and tragedy present a specific way of perceiving Czech cinema, one that was circulating in foreign reception of Jiří Menzel's *Closely Watched Trains* and gradually came to be seen as an important factor in perceptions about Czechoslovak New Wave.<sup>310</sup> Elements of humour and sadness and focus on ordinary people are therefore terms that have a connection to ideas of quality and cinema traditions. One critic, for instance, sees *Cosy Dens* as drawing inspiration from 'the best traditions of Czech film comedy – nostalgically tuned films underlined by poetry, humanism, but also contagious fun, situation gags and storytelling elegance'.<sup>311</sup> Another critic uses a similar evaluative strategy: 'It is a cultured film in which humour, gags and sadness mix. Authors continue with it in the best traditions of Czech comedy'.<sup>312</sup> One critic also sees the film's kindness to be an approach similar to 'Menzel's poetic nostalgia' which, according to this critic, was a 'safe bet' on the director's part, and one that 'surely paid off'.<sup>313</sup> Explicit references to Menzel or other New Wave directors were in fact quite rare in reception of *Cosy Dens*, but the film's connection to ideas of cinema traditions has a strong position in reviews.

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<sup>308</sup> Dominková, 'V rodinných Pelíšcích bývá někdy veselo a někdy truchlivo'.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid.

<sup>310</sup> Bláhová, 'České hubičky na vývoz', pp. 64-91.

<sup>311</sup> Vejnar, 'Hřebejkovy Pelíšky uvádí tento týden Sněžník Děčín a Kinoklub Varnsdorf'.

<sup>312</sup> Anon., 'Příběh mezi slzami a smíchem'.

<sup>313</sup> Andrej Halada, 'Hup do Pelíšků!' *Xantypa*, 6 (1999), p. 104.



It is also striking that very similar descriptive terms and values were in fact circulating in promotion and reception of *Kolya*. One identity constructed for *Kolya* in the ancillary materials labelled the film as a 'family film that fourteen-year-old teenagers, but also middle-aged people and grandmothers will enjoy'.<sup>314</sup> At the same time, *Kolya* was also perceived as a similar blend of pleasures. The supposed kindness of humour was seen in reviews to be enriched by instances of 'bitterness' and 'sadness'. Magazine *Cinema* notices for instance an interplay of kindness and sad topics in the film when its critic writes that if *Kolya* 'were not so touching, funny and hopeful, it would probably be very sad'.<sup>315</sup> Another critic describes the film as 'Ping-Pong of emotions'.<sup>316</sup> However, instead of being interpreted as a disruption to the film's generic identity, the film's darker elements are highlighted to be supporting its human quality. The newspaper *Katolický týdeník* is for example impressed that black humour 'surprisingly gives the film a human warming quality'.<sup>317</sup> These reviews use the film's reliance on different emotions to create the idea of emotional balance – to maintain value, individual sentiments must never become excessive. One critic therefore thinks that while *Kolya* could have been a 'sentimental drama ...', the author chooses a mosaic of ordinary even banal situations and moments in which he balances realness of emotions with humour and intellectually refined, yet easily understandable irony with medical precision'.<sup>318</sup> This idea of balance and tastefulness was to some extent connected to Svěrák's image as depicted in the promotional campaign. As I argued in the previous chapter, ancillary materials presented his signature as being 'softened' by 'irony,' and relying on a 'measured' combination of 'conciliatoriness, kindness and adequate portion of proud patriotism'.<sup>319</sup> Similarly to the reception of *Cosy Dens*, *Kolya* was also seen to rely on a balance of humour, sadness and other elements that made it a measured and tasteful human (and humanist) story for a broad audience.

What is interesting about the evaluation of *Cosy Dens* in the popular press is that critics evoke specific images and ideas about Czech cinema but rarely do so by making explicit comparisons with specific examples of films representative of these traditions. This lack of explicit references to other films in order to validate the film's qualities is especially striking when compared to reviews of *Identity Card* and *Walking Too Fast*, analysed in the following chapters, in which critics more commonly identify films as part of existing cycles and trends

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<sup>314</sup> Dvořáková, 'Jak Louka ke štěstí přišel', p. 7.

<sup>315</sup> Magdalena Bičíková, 'Kolja', *Cinema*, May 1996, pp. 36-39 (p. 39).

<sup>316</sup> Vítková, 'Hra o citech na city'.

<sup>317</sup> Paulas, 'Kolja'.

<sup>318</sup> Kroupová, 'S Koljou se do českého filmu vrací obyčejný lidský příběh'.

<sup>319</sup> Bičíková, 'Zdeněk Svěrák: O psaní, představách a prožitcích', p. 31.

in Czech and 'world' cinema and call upon specific examples to validate a film's elements or bring attention to its flaws. Due to the lack of research on Czech film criticism, I can only speculate about this lack of explicit comparisons with other films in reception of *Cosy Dens*. One reason might be that it was simply more common in reviewing to evaluate films in relation to the filmmaker's previous work rather than place them in cycles. Indeed, the most common reference in reviews of *Cosy Dens* is Hřebejk and Jarchovský's previous film *Big Beat* (*Šakalí léta*; Jan Hřebejk, 1993). As we saw in the previous chapter, *Kolya* was also strongly placed in the lineage of the creative output of its authors. However, it seems to me that the lack of references to other films might also be marked by the underlying need to approach post-communist cinema on its own, as a new chapter, and draw a thick line behind the normalisation cinema tainted by the regime. As a result, the films in whose footsteps *Cosy Dens* is meant to follow are not evoked explicitly but become only more descriptive notions of traditions. This, however, does not quite explain the fact that, despite the similarities in the terms used to describe and evaluate the two films, *Kolya* and *Cosy Dens* are very rarely compared explicitly in reviews as similar types of film. On the other hand, this fact perhaps indicates the matter-of-factness with which the elements of humour, tragedy and focus on ordinary people are seized upon and connected to notions of value in the reception of both films.

As I argued in this section, the value of *Cosy Dens* in mainstream press is strongly connected to the film's broad appeal for audiences of different preferences. This idea is supported not only by the focus on the family theme, the attempts in ancillary materials to contain the historical elements, and constructing its image as a balanced mix of emotional experiences, but also through the emphasis placed on kindness and a sense of humanism with which critics find the film to be approaching its characters. One critic concludes the review of *Cosy Dens* thus: 'We all have our flaws, but we like each other: that's the way we can summarise in a few words the author's attitude towards the characters and figures of *Cosy Dens*'.<sup>320</sup> Another critic agrees that the director 'sees his protagonists rather kindly and doesn't mock them' reaffirming therefore the notion that the viewing experience was mainly to be a comforting one.<sup>321</sup> Similarly, one critic strongly connects the film's value to its popularity in cinemas. The review for magazine *Reflex* starts by expressing the critic's happiness over the fact that the film seems to be attracting large audiences:

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<sup>320</sup> Chvojková, 'Obrázková knížka let šedesátých'.

<sup>321</sup> Halada, 'Hup do Pelíšků!'.

I haven't been so happy for a long time like last sunny Sunday, at half past five in front of Prague cinema Atlas, when people were squeezing, pushing and swearing because they wanted to go to the cinema to see Czech film *Cosy Dens* instead of going to the boats.... I placed a bet that *Cosy Dens* will even overtake *Kolya* in attendance; if I lose, it's not going to be by much. It is an exceptional film and that's the way it should be.<sup>322</sup>

In this review, the ability of the film to attract audiences to the cinema seems to be a value in itself. Furthermore, it is endowed with the critic's approval of the film's qualities. Nevertheless, the critic shows the importance of audience patronage of Czech cinema. As I mentioned in the introduction to this thesis Czech cinemas used to enjoy quite a high attendance during the socialist regime. It is therefore possible to see such evocations of value as a nostalgic remembrance of the idea of cinema as a popular medium for broad audiences.

### Pleasures in Critical Canons

Some critics therefore interpreted *Cosy Dens* as a film for the whole family and connected its qualities to notions of cinema traditions. However, some critics writing for more 'serious' publications evoked different notions of value.

In the previous chapter, I argued that there was a tension between interpretations made in positive and negative reviews of *Kolya*. Negative reviews, mostly associated with serious publications (and subsequently dismissed by some as elitist) were interpreting the film as a populist, inauthentic image of Czechness. Opinions of critics such as Jiří Cieslar tended to show a preference for cinema that was, in simplified terms, more 'serious', or as Cieslar put it in his review of *Kolya*, cinema that 'is characterised not by pouring oil into well-running gears of life comfort and illusions, but which throws a few dragging grains of sand into it'.<sup>323</sup> Similar notions of value can be found in reception of *Cosy Dens*. If critics writing for broad audiences valued the film as an array of pleasures for the whole family, highbrow critics employed different notions of value that emphasise primarily lack of seductive pleasures. For instance, in an article on *Cosy Dens* in magazine *Cinepur* the critic interprets the film as uncovering some uncomfortable truths. For him, it is 'not just a comedy' but also a 'diagnosis of the society', that 'mercilessly tightens the noose around the neck of the whole

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<sup>322</sup> Tomáš Baldýnský, 'Pelíšky', *Reflex*, 22 April 1999, p. 63.

<sup>323</sup> Cieslar, 'Kolja'.

society'.<sup>324</sup> In a rare example of comparative references in the film's reception, he connects the film's qualities to 'the best of Věra Chytilová's films from the sixties and seventies'.<sup>325</sup> The film's family scenes are according to him part of its value. However, for him they are not so much a pleasant reminder of eternal inter-generational conflicts but a depiction of the 'crisis of family'.<sup>326</sup> According to him, 'The family element of *Cosy Dens* seems almost horrifying: the attempt to maintain cosy safety of the family circle that both fathers instinctively strive for, appears from the point of view of the maturing generation as an empty schema. *Cosy Dens* therefore gradually changes into a too tight cage'.<sup>327</sup> This critic therefore also believes the film to be narrated mainly from the point of view of teenagers, but it is not a pleasant, nostalgic return to childhood. On the other hand, one of the reservations this critic has about the film is its lack of commitment to the discomfoting realities. According to him the film does not grab the opportunity to 'depict individual tragedy' and is 'overly conciliatory' in some places.<sup>328</sup> In this account, while *Cosy Dens* is interpreted as a valuable film, it is done through different evaluative strategies that highlight the film's reflective and discomfoting capacities.

If this critic from *Cinepur* was able to apply different evaluative strategies to validate the film, Jiří Cieslar on the other hand, was less appreciative. In his review for *Literární noviny* he finds *Cosy Dens* to be bereft of serious concerns completely: 'If *Cosy Dens* doesn't want something, it's bothering with questions, and it providently doesn't mean to trouble itself with moralising at all'.<sup>329</sup> Instead, the film tries to evoke 'comfort', which Cieslar sees, for example, in the film's exclusion of the period's unpleasant realities. According to him, the film's aim is 'if possible, to painlessly, even pleasantly replace (remembered) reality with flattering mystification – to offend nobody, to indulge everyone'.<sup>330</sup> Repeating similar notions of value as in his review of *Kolya*, Cieslar again shows a preference for cinema that disrupts the spectator's sense of comfort. In its comforting tendencies Cieslar connects *Cosy Dens* to television culture; it is a film, he writes, that 'with its imagination and courage ... reaches more to television productions of the eighties'.<sup>331</sup> In a way, therefore, Cieslar also connects *Cosy Dens* to ideas of Czech traditions. However, contrary to the evocations of 'the

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<sup>324</sup> Luboš Ptáček, 'Jejich pelechý a naše pelíšky: O rodině a národní identitě', *Cinepur*, 13 (1999), pp. 20–23 (p. 20).

<sup>325</sup> Ibid.

<sup>326</sup> Ibid.

<sup>327</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>328</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>329</sup> Jiří Cieslar, 'Ohlédnutí za Pelíšky a úspěšná česká slova', *Literární noviny*, 6 October 1999, p. 13.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid.

<sup>331</sup> Ibid.

best comedy traditions' in more mainstream publications, or *Cinepur's* connections to New Wave films, Cieslar's references are not meant to validate the film's value; quite the opposite. It is meant to indicate its backwardness and lowness. As Mazierka argues, 'television had very bad connotations in Czechoslovak and Polish anti-communist discourse' because it was perceived as the state's 'transmitter of lies' that aimed to change 'the individual into a passive consumer, a member of a herd, easily lulled, manipulated and ultimately morally barren'.<sup>332</sup> With its populist appeal, *Cosy Dens* is therefore not a work to be admired but a reminder of the manipulative aspects of socialist popular culture.

Just as the reception of *Kolya* was marked by a struggle of different taste formations for authority, these struggles appeared to some extent in reviews of *Cosy Dens*, too. As Jancovich shows on the example of cult fandoms and academic discourses, interpretative groups will often refer to (and construct) the mainstream Other in order to establish their 'sense of cultural superiority'.<sup>333</sup> Critics such as Cieslar for example not only showed disdain towards the kind of filmmaking that he saw as populist, but also critics valorising it. Common in his reviews is the use of what Mathijs calls 'extrinsic references' – 'acknowledgment of previous receptions and already existing frames of reference'.<sup>334</sup> Cieslar's articles on *Kolya* and *Cosy Dens* were written a few months after the release of the two films. In them he therefore reacts not only to the films themselves but also their reception and standing in the box office. In fact, he frames his review of *Kolya* as a response to 'other critics' who he finds to be too forgiving in their reviews, unable to maintain the right artistic values and critical judgement: 'While reading early reviews, I had a feeling that the writers ... were either press officers of the film or closest friends of the authors; their task being to use their routine words to translate what they had earlier found out in interviews'.<sup>335</sup> Cieslar's review of *Cosy Dens* similarly starts with an expression of annoyance over critics' inability to critique the film and their relaxed approval of the film's comforting pleasures. He says that he was 'urged to write by the thick tome of responses. Tens of reviews were expressing rare satisfaction'.<sup>336</sup> As can be guessed, he does not think the film deserves such a broad praise. The success of *Cosy Dens*, it seems to him, might be a sign that 'we have overlooked our lowering of standards'.<sup>337</sup> He identifies the director's goal to appeal to broad audiences, 'to be always

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<sup>332</sup> Mazierska, *Masculinities in Polish, Czech and Slovak Cinema*, pp. 112-113.

<sup>333</sup> Mark Jancovich, 'Cult Fictions: Cult Movies, Subcultural Capital and the Production of Cultural Distinctions', *Cultural Studies*, 16.2 (2002), 306-322, p. 321.

<sup>334</sup> Mathijs, 'Bad Reputations', p. 467.

<sup>335</sup> Cieslar, 'Kolja'.

<sup>336</sup> Cieslar, 'Ohlédnutí za Pelíšky a úspěšná česká slova'.

<sup>337</sup> Ibid.

accepted', as he says, but this is driven to an extreme in the film and Czech cinema in general.<sup>338</sup> According to him, 'many Czech filmmakers turned the desire to succeed to be their absolute goal and they let it to enthrall them to the bone... However, doesn't the audience, criticism, almost all of us support them in it?'<sup>339</sup> Critics (as well as audiences) should, according to him demand something 'more' from filmmakers.

Criticism of *Kolya* and *Cosy Dens* was therefore initially quite closely connected to claims to a refined taste that is distinct from mainstream criticism and a sign of 'higher standards'. Another critic, Andrej Stankovič, similarly tended to refer to his colleagues from newspapers as the 'lobby'.<sup>340</sup> In his article titled 'What to Do when *Kolya* Wins' he criticises Czech film critics for their 'provincial mentality' and 'herd behaviour', for valorising *Kolya* and rejecting films that are more risky or that can be understood only by a 'cultured spectator'.<sup>341</sup> Stankovič was also similarly critical of *Cosy Dens* and Hřebejk's next film *Divided We Fall* (*Musíme si pomáhat*; Jan Hřebejk, 2000), for being 'nostalgic' and based on an 'absurd' premise, among other things.<sup>342</sup> It is quite telling that after Stankovič's death one of the collections of his essays was released under the name *What to Do when Kolya Wins*. With over 100 article names to choose from, this move indicates the maintenance of the critic's image as a representative of a specific taste formation that not only opposes the idea of quality represented by *Kolya* but also the taste formation valorising it.

While the aim here is not to oppose the interpretations made by these critics, it is not difficult to argue that the dismissal of comforting pleasures in writing striving to represent a more refined taste has been one of the reasons why the idea of the family film has attracted little attention in Czech film histories. In fact, quite often this taste formation shows a tendency to dismiss escapist pleasures of Czech cinema on the grounds that they are tainted by the ideological influences of the communist regime. In her essay on 'crazy Czech comedies' made in the 1970s and 1980s Petra Hanáková argues that these comedies 'are today often looked down upon as the epitome of escapism and ideologically complicit

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<sup>338</sup> Ibid.

<sup>339</sup> Ibid.

<sup>340</sup> Andrej Stankovič, 'Tvář zasmušilá, oko suché', in *Co dělat, když Kolja vítězí*, ed. by Michael Špirit (Prague: Triáda, 2008), pp. 201-206 (p. 201) (first publ. in *Lidové noviny*, 16 March 2000, supplement Umění a Kritika, pp. 17, 20).

<sup>341</sup> Andrej Stankovič, 'Co dělat, když Kolja vítězí', in *Co dělat, když Kolja vítězí*, ed. by Michael Špirit (Prague: Triáda, 2008), pp. 144-151 (pp. 144-147) (first publ. in *Kritická Příloha Revolver Revue*, 7 (1997), pp. 165-169). Stankovic even created his own film award for 'niche' films that are neglected by mainstream criticism.

<sup>342</sup> Stankovič, 'Tvář zasmušilá, oko suché', p. 202.

entertainment'.<sup>343</sup> As she says, 'The mainstream production of the 1970s and 1980s thus remains "the cinema we feel ashamed of" — the "we" here meaning intellectuals, film historians and critics (and not so much common spectators, with whom the genre has remained popular to the present)'.<sup>344</sup> Writing histories of these genres would therefore possibly require critics to look at films that did not criticise the regime and which might have even been endorsing it (not least by their seeming 'apoliticism'). This is a point that seems to be tricky to overcome in a lot of writing on Czech cinema.

It is also not the case that the ideological influence of the regime simply ended with the Velvet Revolution. According to some, it keeps exerting its influence even today in the form of popular cinema. This idea appears for example in Kamil Fila's review of Marie Poledňáková's *You Kiss Like a God* (*Libáš jako Bůh*; 2009). While written ten years after the release of *Cosy Dens*, it demonstrates well a particular strand of argument that has occasionally been directed at popular Czech cinema, especially those films that have not had the benefit of being validated as allegories or satirical commentaries on the society. In his review, Fila labels *You Kiss Like a Good* with the pejorative term 'normalisation comedy'.<sup>345</sup> As he explains, 'Let's not take the word "normalisation" in the sense "convinced communist"'.<sup>346</sup> Instead he uses the term to refer to the comforting and escapist illusions that many films relied on during the normalisation period of the 1970s and 1980s. As he says, 'the principle of normalisation was' to evade 'everything political', so that 'people in the end forget in what conditions they live, and [it] then seems to them bearable – normal and "natural"'.<sup>347</sup> Fila demonstrates in his review (and especially in his additional notes to the review) his preference for films that comment on the world outside the cinema in a satirical way (for example Ladislav Smoljak's comedies). It is not that he is fully against the idea of escapism in film, but he likes the intentions of escapism to be clearly marked, best by introducing fantasy elements like in films of Miloš Macourek.<sup>348</sup> Poledňáková, he argues, continues to make films in the same way as in the 1970s. Her films made in the normalisation

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<sup>343</sup> Petra Hanáková, 'The Films We Are Ashamed of': Czech Crazy Comedy of the 1970s and 1980s', in *Via Transversa: Lost Cinema of the Former Eastern Bloc*, ed. by Eva Năripea and Andreas Trossek (Tallin: Estonian Academy of Arts, 2008), pp. 109–121 (p. 111).

<sup>344</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>345</sup> Kamil Fila, 'Nový film Poledňákové. Bože, bylo nám toho zapotřebí?' *Aktuálně.cz*, 12 February 2009, available at: <<https://magazin.aktualne.cz/kultura/film/novy-film-polednakove-boze-bylo-nam-toho-zapotrebi/r~i:article:629392/>> [accessed 27 June 2020].

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>348</sup> Kamil Fila, 'Jak pokračuje normalizace ve filmech a v nás', *Aktuálně.cz*, 17 February 2009, available at: <<https://magazin.aktualne.cz/kultura/film/jak-pokracuje-normalizace-ve-filmech-a-v-nas/r~i:article:629846/>> [accessed 27 June 2020].

period 'take place in seemingly realistic Czechoslovakia of the time, therefore it is possible to claim about them that they manipulate reality because they constantly improve it and still claim that we're in a world that existed'.<sup>349</sup> In this way, Poledňáková was part of the socialist machinery which through 'kitschily pleasing entertainment' aimed to 'dim down the interest in politics' and turn people into a 'conformist and consumerist herd'.<sup>350</sup> Fila argues that in her films made after the fall of communism, Poledňáková simply continues in this normalisation tradition.

This interpretative framework is in fact very similar to the one that appeared in Jan Čulík's analysis of *Cosy Dens* in his book. Čulík suggests that the themes of *Cosy Dens* have roots in the culture of the normalisation period. He finds *Cosy Dens* to be evoking a 'normalisation legacy':

The normalisation legacy is clear: give us a rest from politics.... It is not a coincidence at all that *Cosy Dens* dedicates so much time to typical Czech Christmas celebrations in the narrow family circle, which has the top place in the pantheon of Czech values. It is the most intense expression of a desire to close oneself as tightly as possible in the safety of family.<sup>351</sup>

Interestingly, while Čulík creates the impression that the theme of family comfort has prominence in Czech cinema, he does not go beyond dismissing it as a mere distortion of historical realities and a remnant of the ideologies of socialism. He merely ends up arguing that the populist efforts of the film only lead to distorted depictions of the national past.<sup>352</sup>

It therefore remains that while comedy is comfortably accepted as an important part of Czech cinema in academic works, family film is much less so. Even the canons of comedy, however, strongly depend on the critic's ability to identify elements of social commentary, allegory and satire. For instance, in an attempt to justify discussing Jiří Menzel's film *Seclusion Near a Forest* (*Na samotě u lesa*, 1976), Peter Hames concludes in his book that 'the film's reconciliatory comedy nonetheless contained some sharp observations'.<sup>353</sup> It therefore seems that the value of comedy in academic accounts is primarily decided by its critical reflection and contemplation on the society that needs to go beyond mere 'reconciliation'. Similarly, Hames discusses *Cosy Dens* mainly in the chapter titled 'Politics' and points out that

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<sup>349</sup> Ibid.

<sup>350</sup> Ibid.

<sup>351</sup> Čulík, *Jací sme*, pp. 196-197.

<sup>352</sup> Ibid., pp. 197-198.

<sup>353</sup> Peter Hames, *Czech and Slovak Cinema*, p. 48.



the political situation of the period is merely 'a world to be endured' in the film, looked at from the perspective of 'men and women without real influence'.<sup>354</sup> As such, the film therefore provides 'little political analysis'.<sup>355</sup> Family film, on the other hand, does not have a place in the book as a specific tendency in Czech cinema history.

## Conclusions

In this chapter I looked at the idea of the family film as a type of film that is aimed at a broad cross-generational audience and responds to 'cultural requirements for optimistic, comforting narratives that provide reassurance ... escapism and release from everyday pressures and anxieties'.<sup>356</sup> I explored how this sense of comfort, reassurance and escapism is constructed in the promotion and reception in mainstream publications of one specific film – *Cosy Dens*. I argued that the film's value was being negotiated with reference to the 'social work' it was deemed to perform on the audience in the auditorium. Critics described especially responses that saw adults in the audience to come to terms with their changing roles in family by returning to childhood through the film's focus on teenage characters. As a result, the audiences were being constructed as undertaking a learning experience that helped them to come to terms with the eternal inter-generational conflicts in family.

In this case, the value of *Cosy Dens* was being constructed around its community building capacities. The audience was to be united in an 'imagined community' of people with similar experiences.<sup>357</sup> This idea was especially well expressed by the director in the promotional campaign of the film who emphasised the depiction of family rituals of 'Christmases, weddings, funerals'<sup>358</sup> in the film because they help 'us feel affiliated with other, similarly affected people'.<sup>359</sup> I did not analyse these examples of what Michael Billig has called 'banal nationalism' in this chapter.<sup>360</sup> However, it presents one of the directions potential future research could take.

In this chapter I showed that there were several key terms that were used in reviews as evidence of the quality of *Cosy Dens* as well as *Kolya*. I showed that critics writing for

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<sup>354</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>355</sup> Ibid.

<sup>356</sup> Brown, *The Hollywood Family Film*, p. 31.

<sup>357</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (London; New York: Verso, 2006).

<sup>358</sup> Spáčilová, 'Film Pelíšky chce pobavit všechny generace'.

<sup>359</sup> Lederer, 'Vyprávění trapasů mě stále fascinuje, říká Jan Hřebejk'.

<sup>360</sup> Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London; Thousand Oaks; New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 1995).

mainstream publications tend to highlight the balanced combination of emotional pleasures the films offer. Many reviews praised the moments of comedy and drama and the kindness with which the films approached their characters. Similarly, the focus on the family environment in *Cosy Dens* was perceived by some critics as an appropriate evasion of 'serious' themes such as politics. I showed that in some publications these pleasures are validated as part of a longer tradition, and that critics emphasising them evoke the idea of Czech cinema connected to a broad audience appeal.

Peter Krämer and Noel Brown both believe that the generic heterogeneity of the family film is one of the reasons why the family film has not attracted a lot of academic attention. According to Krämer, the category of the family film simply seems to be resisting the 'systematic analysis of iconography, narrative patterns and the thematic concerns underpinning much of genre studies'.<sup>361</sup> It is however clear that whatever little attention Hollywood family films might have gathered it is more than can be said about the concept of the family film in the Czech context. I argued that the serious taste formation rarely pays attention to the comforting pleasures that might figure in the appreciation of Czech cinema of some audiences, and if it does, it is usually to dismiss them as a product of the communist ideology. There is therefore a lot of space for work that approaches popular Czech cinema in other ways than just a simple product of an ideology imposed on audiences.

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<sup>361</sup> Peter Krämer, "'The Best Disney Film Disney Never Made': Children's Films and the Family Audience in American Cinema since the 1960s", in *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, ed. by Steve Neale (London: British Film Institute, 2002), pp. 185-200 (p. 186).

## Chapter 3: 'Up to Speed?' Comfort and the Shifting Critical Discourse of Quality

When *Identity Card* was released in cinemas in 2010, one critic started his review by outlining the preconceptions it was facing in the sphere of film criticism. He describes especially the uncertain position the film's generic identity had in current hierarchies of values. To get the critics' seal of approval, the film had to find a way around several reservations:

First of them lies in the rich experience with films based on Jarchovský's scripts situated in the past (*Cosy Dens*, *Pupendo*, etc). Together with [director] Jan Hřebejk they became new symbols of the so-called 'pretty Czech film' that the thinking part of domestic critics gradually stopped being interested in. Therefrom came the second reason for the initial contempt towards *Identity Card*, the general exhaustion of Czech retro films. By following conventional narrative forms, they simply don't have much to offer anymore.<sup>362</sup>

There are several things of note in this quote. The critic connects *Identity Card* to the same style of filmmaking as *Cosy Dens*. However, he makes it clear that this style is not 'interesting' to him and other critics. On the other hand, by describing the loss in interest as a gradual process he admits the style's previous 'quality' reputation. In the past, we can assume, critics were more interested in it. Secondly, the critic makes distinctions between different kinds of critics as well. It is the 'thinking critics' who are uninterested in the tasteful quality of the 'pretty Czech' retro film. The 'non-thinking' critics who are not 'up to speed' with critical trends might presumably still uphold the outdated notions of quality. In this excerpt the critic reveals the ever-changing notions of quality and value. However, the distinction between 'thinking' and 'non-thinking' critics indicates that there are also 'wrong' values a critic can maintain; for critics wishing to sustain their status as cultural gate-keepers, they need to position themselves correctly in the hierarchies of taste formations. In other words, he presents criticism to be under the pressure to 'keep up' with current cultural trends.

As I argued in previous chapters, the evaluative frameworks employed in reviews of *Cosy Dens* and *Kolya* published especially in mainstream publications commonly connected

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<sup>362</sup> Ivo Michalík, 'Občanský průkaz konečně podmínkou pochopení českého retro-filmu', *25fps*, 24 October 2010, available at <<http://25fps.cz/2010/obcansky-prukaz-konecne-podminkou-pochopeni-ceskeho-retro-filmu/>> [accessed 8 July 2020].

their value to a variety of pleasures evoking comfort and escape. Furthermore, some critics started to call the style of these film 'pretty Czech'. While it has never become a widely used generic label, critics have associated it especially with several films made in the nineties that fill their narratives with humour and kindness towards the flaws of 'ordinary people'. Furthermore, in the example above the 'pretty Czech' style is also seemingly synonymous with the term 'retro' film. As we saw, many reviews validated the comforting pleasures of *Kolya* and *Cosy Dens* by connecting them to ideas of Czech comedy traditions. In the case of *Kolya*, they were often not only deemed to be part of Czech culture but were also speaking to and exploring Czech national character. I also showed that the reception of *Kolya* was influenced by hopes of presenting Czech quality filmmaking abroad. However, ideas about what quality Czech cinema is and should be underwent a considerable overhaul in the following years. In this chapter I analyse the promotion and reception of *Identity Card* and look at how the flow of talk around the film in ancillary materials published around the film's release responds to cultural contexts and negotiates different notions of quality. Specifically, I argue that critics writing both for mainstream and more specialised publications place an increased emphasis on historical representation and highlight elements that are seen to disrupt the audience's sense of pleasure and comfort in the experience of watching a film set in the communist past.

Therefore, as I will demonstrate in more detail shortly, many reviews and promotional texts circulating around *Identity Card* employ interpretative strategies vastly different from the meanings circulating around *Kolya* and *Cosy Dens* at the time of their release, despite the fact that they are commonly seen as the same 'type' of film. This, of course, brings up the question why the old notions of quality became outdated so drastically and I look at several reasons for this development. On the one hand, I interpret this shift in evaluative strategies as a result of different pressures to 'keep up' with current cultural developments. I approach this pressure on criticism as a middlebrow tendency that is fuelled by admiration of the legitimate culture and which is in return at the heart of the middlebrow's association with 'shifting definitions of identities, shifting class alignments and shifting processes of working through'.<sup>363</sup> An aspect especially evident in the data analysed in the chapter below is the importance of the 'preference for the "right kind" of film artistry as a conspicuous marker of one's social position'.<sup>364</sup> In the case of *Identity Card*, the 'right kind' is increasingly being constructed by using evaluative terms that I identified in previous

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<sup>363</sup> Faulkner, 'Introduction. Approaching the Middlebrow: Audience; Text; Institution', p. 3.

<sup>364</sup> Chris Cagle, 'Two Modes of Prestige Film,' *Screen* 48.3 (2007), 291-311, p. 304.

chapters in reviews aiming to make claims to higher tastes. Furthermore, it is also constructed in opposition to the 'old'. The old is a discursive construct of the same genre, now deemed outdated, but many elements of which were, ironically, previously commonly emphasised as signs of quality filmmaking.

I will also focus on the increasing sense of urgency in debates about 'coming to terms with the past'. This chapter argues that ancillary materials for *Identity Card* also indicate a shifting discourse about the role of cinema and what pleasures it should offer to audiences. While in previous chapters I argued that mainstream critics evaluated *Kolya* and *Cosy Dens* with consideration of the films' pleasures for a broad spectatorship, the flow of talk around *Identity Card* associates 'popular pleasures' especially with television and negotiates ideas of cinema quality in opposition to them. The concept of the middlebrow is therefore also useful because it considers how notions of 'the right kind of film artistry' are negotiated in relation to perceived hierarchies between different media. In fact, this chapter is largely inspired by Chris Cagle's work on post-war Hollywood prestige films and the accompanying shifts in notions of quality. In his essay Cagle looks at different contexts that influenced the emergence of a new type of a 'prestige film' that was different from lavish pre-war literary adaptations. While both types of film constituted the prestige output of Hollywood studios, they were stylistically different and appealed to different notions of quality. Cagle gives two reasons for this development – industry reorganisation and 'altered relation of cinema to the other arts'.<sup>365</sup> Similar to Cagle's observation, I will demonstrate that in the 2000s Czech critics envision Czech retro films as having a different 'nature and role'<sup>366</sup> than the role *Cosy Dens* and *Kolya* were seen as fulfilling at the time of their release. My argument is that discourses about popular culture, mainly debates about its role in disseminating what has been called nostalgia for communism, raised demands on cinema that sought it be elevated above the 'low' pleasures of the popular, especially television culture.

Contrary to Cagle, who notices aesthetic differences between the two types of prestige film, I do not focus on textual differences between the different 'quality films'. In this chapter my aim is to look mainly at the interpretative shifts in contemporary press. Indeed, there are several textual similarities and contextual parallels that could justify similar evaluative approaches to both kinds of films. Both *Cosy Dens* and *Identity Card* were produced by the production company Total Help Art. Both were written by Petr Jarchovský

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<sup>365</sup> Ibid., p. 301.

<sup>366</sup> Ibid., p. 293.

and based on stories of Petr Šabach. Both include scenes of intergenerational conflicts in family – *Identity Card* tells the story of four adolescent friends encountering numerous clashes with the communist regime as well as their families. Moreover, both can be seen as comedies that include several dramatic moments in the tradition of delivering ‘tears and laughter’. However, I am especially interested in the shift as primarily discursive, manifesting in the rhetorical devices in critical reception and promotion.

In this regard, the work of Ernest Mathijs on the prominence of AIDS references in criticism of David Cronenberg’s films will be very useful. In his essay, Mathijs sees AIDS as a topical reference point that together with rhetorical practices helps critics ‘drive home’ their arguments and maintain cultural relevance of their criticism.<sup>367</sup> He writes that these references ‘do not necessarily reflect the film text but rather topical and rhetorical practices in film criticism and a critical discourse that is as much concerned with its own subject as with its own ends’.<sup>368</sup> I find Mathijs’s focus on topical and rhetorical practices as techniques that help to ‘legitimize criticism by transforming it into an activity that achieves cultural relevance’ useful for explaining the shifts in interpretative practices of Czech mainstream criticism.<sup>369</sup> The nostalgia debate became such a significant topic that making references to it and incorporating its rhetorics became even necessary for critics in order to maintain legitimacy of their criticism and present themselves as ‘thinking critics’.

There are especially two main strategies I look at in this chapter through which I find critics to be maintaining the relevance of their criticism: emphasis on the representation of the communist regime and positioning the style of previous films from the genre as outdated. I first introduce the discussions about appropriate ‘coming to terms with the communist past’ and the related debates about nostalgic representations of communism in popular films and television. As we will see, the worries about nostalgia see popular culture adversely affecting public consciousness about the past. I will show how film critics adopt many of the rhetorics of these debates in reviews of *Identity Card*. The shift in evaluative and interpretative strategies is especially striking when compared to the reception of *Cosy Dens*. I will therefore occasionally be comparing the interpretative strategies appearing in the flow of talk around *Identity Card* to reviews of *Cosy Dens* throughout the chapter.

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<sup>367</sup> Ernest Mathijs, ‘AIDS References in the Critical Reception of David Cronenberg: “It May Not Be Such a Bad Disease after All,”’ *Cinema Journal* 42.4 (2003), 29-45, p. 29.

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39.

<sup>369</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

In the second section I explain this shift in critical approaches as a change in perceptions about the 'nature and role' of quality production of national cinema. I look at interviews and promotional articles published before the film's release to analyse the way producers were appealing to the new notions of quality. I look at how they define the film's relevance in relation to other media – the emphasis they place on distinction from 'the popular', especially television, and evocations to high art to give the film 'an aura of respectability'.<sup>370</sup> I then come back again to discourses about the nature and role of cinema in the reception of *Cosy Dens* to highlight the shift in the significance of the 'popular' in notions of quality in national cinema.

### Nostalgia and Coming to Terms with the Past

In this section I aim to outline the concerns, assumptions and terms emerging in the debates about nostalgia for communism in the Czech Republic in late 2000s. As I will demonstrate below, nostalgia came to be seen in elite circles as a growing tendency in the society, perpetuated especially by popular culture. I will analyse these discourses by focusing on magazine *Cinepur* that dedicated one issue to Ostalgie (portmanteau of German terms for 'East' and 'nostalgia') in 2011. While the issue was published one year after the release of *Identity Card*, it explicates many of the assumptions that had also found their way into reviews of *Identity Card* published in more mainstream publications. I therefore analyse these articles not as texts that affected reception of the film but to demonstrate the set of discourses already in circulation around the release of *Identity Card*. What these articles demonstrate well is the growing emphasis on representation more in line with historiographic notions of evaluation of the past. This perception of 'correct' historical representation also greatly informed the perceived characteristics of the outdated retro style that became an important reference in promotion and reception of the film. I will later show that many of the concerns and assumptions were already present in more implicit forms in reviews of *Identity Card*. I will look at how critics construct their arguments and emphasise specific aspects of the film in order to maintain the topicality of their criticism.

In his essay on the reception of Cronenberg's films, Mathijs traces the origin of AIDS references to an exchange between two critics, John Harkness and Robin Wood, who in two articles presented their differing views on the value and cultural relevance of Cronenberg's films. Mathijs then analyses the adoption of AIDS references in other academic works. With

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<sup>370</sup> Chris Cagle, 'Two Modes of Prestige Film', p. 293.

his own essay he shows 'the importance of chronology in film reception' and 'that references can be traced back to specific cultural events'.<sup>371</sup> Indeed, this original cultural event towards which we can trace Czech nostalgia debates is the observation of the phenomenon of Ostalgie in unified Germany. However, I find this cultural event to be a matter of discursive construction, defined by the debates themselves. It does not necessarily mean that discussions about German Ostalgie were 'first' or in any way original. After all, nostalgic tendencies have been observed and criticised in many cultural contexts.<sup>372</sup> Furthermore, nostalgia debates are often connected to concerns over the historical authenticity of films which are far from new in arguments about films set in the past.<sup>373</sup> However, there is a considerable sense of 'primacy' ascribed to the German phenomenon in Czech debates. One sign of this is the adoption of the term Ostalgie itself and its application to Czech context. At the same time, the first article in the issue of *Cinepur* outlines Ostalgie's emergence in Germany and highlights the similarities and differences between German and Czech contexts. Ostalgie is transformed in *Cinepur* into an event with its own history, originating in Germany, but gradually finding its way to the Czech Republic as well; with different local variations but the same nature.

What Czech critics seem to have adopted from the German debate is the focus it places on popular and consumer culture. In Germany the success of commercial products and services that drew appeal from the 'pastness' of the GDR as well as the success of retro-focused TV shows, hotels and other inventions were giving the impression, so the argument went, that large population of the country was nostalgically longing for the past. With its seemingly uncritical look at the problematic national past, it was at odds with the goal of German unification and evaluation of the GDR history.<sup>374</sup> Similarly, nostalgia in the Czech Republic is seen as a danger to objective evaluation of the past and even as a troubling manifestation of sympathies towards the regime. In 2008, in one of the first historiographic anthologies on Czech post-1989 society, Martin Franc presents a chapter titled 'Ostalgie in Czechia' in which he analyses its manifestations in Czech culture. He defines Ostalgie as a 'positively coloured relationship towards some phenomenon from the arena of consumerism

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<sup>371</sup> Mathijs, 'AIDS References in the Critical Reception of David Cronenberg', p. 39.

<sup>372</sup> See for example Higson, 'Re-presenting the National Past: Nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film', or Paul Grainge, *Monochrome Memories: Nostalgia and Style in 1990s America* (Westport; London: Praeger, 2002).

<sup>373</sup> See for example Sue Harper, *Picturing the Past: The Rise and Fall of the British Costume Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1994), pp. 56-77 for an analysis of such debates in relation to British historical films.

<sup>374</sup> Paul Cooke, 'Performing "Ostalgie": Leander Haussmann's *Sonnenallee*', *German Life and Letters*, 56.2 (2003), 156-167, pp. 156-157.



or directly towards consumer goods connected with the era ... of the so-called soviet bloc'.<sup>375</sup> In this chapter Franc not only looks at examples that fit this definition but also analyses the anxieties manifesting in debates about the popularity of these cultural objects (which range from popular music, films and TV shows and consumer goods). Franc does not see consumption of Ostalgie objects to be governed by longing for the past regime. According to him, 'rather than [reflecting] sympathies for communism, they reflect a certain variety of consumer-oriented liberalism and a rejection of moralist norms for the arena of consumption'.<sup>376</sup> On the other hand, the fact that he poses his argument as a response to this position indicates its prominence in initial understandings of Ostalgie.

In fact, the arguments found in *Cinepur* tend to focus on Ostalgie primarily as an obstacle for appropriate and objective coming to terms with the past.<sup>377</sup> We therefore find that existing Czech films set in the past 'rewrite the history of normalisation and legitimise conformist behaviour of a large part of Czech(oslovak) public'<sup>378</sup> or that 'Such Ostalgie production does not lead to coming to terms with the past and it doesn't lead to its understanding'.<sup>379</sup> The arguments in the magazine take issue especially with the light-hearted, kind approach of the comedy genre that does not let the dark side of the past to appear or might even present the past as a pleasant time. Another problematic aspect, critics write, is the exploitation of period artefacts for sensory and nostalgic pleasures. According to them, Czech post-1989 cinema presents 'consensual, reconciling image'.<sup>380</sup> Other writers also find that with its colourful 'alibistic reconciliation', films *Cosy Dens* and *Pupendo* 'concentrate all the kindness and conciliation that the Czech society (or at least Czech filmmakers) gathered in the 1990s'.<sup>381</sup> Connected to this is the family environment several works set in the past emphasise at the expense of 'big history'. Instead of encouraging historical reflection and better understanding of the past, these works trap audiences in their memories that selectively emphasise the pleasant and the familiar(/I).<sup>382</sup> Existing Czech

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<sup>375</sup> Martin Franc, 'Ostalgie v Čechách', in *Kapitoly z dějin české demokracie po roce 1989*, ed. by Adéla Gjuríčová and Michal Kopeček (Prague; Litomyšl: Paseka, 2008), pp. 193-216 (p. 194).

<sup>376</sup> Ibid., p. 215.

<sup>377</sup> Academic works looking at Czech communist nostalgia as a multi-faceted issue start to appear only a few years later. See for example Veronika Pehe's work 'The Colours of Socialism: Visual Nostalgia and Retro Aesthetics in Czech Film and Television', *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 57.3-4 (2015), 239-253 and *Velvet Retro: Postsocialist Nostalgia and the Politics of Heroism in Czech Popular Culture* (New York; Oxford: Berghahn, 2020).

<sup>378</sup> Jan Kolář, 'Téma', *Cinepur*, 78 (2010), p. 55.

<sup>379</sup> Ina Marešová, 'Svůdný klam popreliví', *Cinepur*, 78 (2010), pp. 56-58 (p. 58).

<sup>380</sup> Jaroslav Pinkas, 'Jak hrozná doba! Jak krásná léta!', *Cinepur*, 78 (2010), pp. 67-69 (p. 68).

<sup>381</sup> Matouš Hájek and Matěj Vlček, 'Špatná paměť a bohaté vzpomínky', *Cinepur*, 78 (2010), pp. 70-73 (p. 71).

<sup>382</sup> Ibid.

cinema is in *Cinepur* largely accused of feeding the nation's nostalgic desires (and reflecting it at the same time, depending on what rhetoric the writer decides to employ at particular times) and only very slowly moving towards topics of historiographic value.

There are therefore two primary assumptions that these arguments about the dangers of Ostalgie in Czech context rely on. On the one hand there is the positioning of nostalgic sensibilities as 'mirroring' hidden desires of the general public. On the other hand, there is the assumption that these films themselves affect the perception of the public about the past. Occasionally special attention is paid to young generations who do not have their own experience with the regime. German Ostalgie, one *Cinepur* writer says 'introduced the GDR to younger generations as a realm of colours' which the critic presents as an unwanted by-product of the phenomenon.<sup>383</sup> But other generations are also seen as being under the threat of having their perceptions dulled and distorted through these representations. Another writer analyses in her contribution Czech TV series *Wonderful Times* (*Vyprávěj*; ČT1 2009–2013) which she thinks focuses too much on period details and family events while pushing 'big history' to the background. She finds this approach unsatisfactory and negatively affecting the country's population: 'Its only product is the creation of a society of "recallers" (not "rememberers"), of hypochondriacs of heart, who collectively share and copy their family photo albums'.<sup>384</sup>

Both of these assumptions indicate a concern about the shape of consciousness and understanding of the communist regime. The past in film is here treated as a 'memory' that is unreliable and even distorted. This imagining of cinema as society's memory is clear from the editor's introduction to the topic where he describes Ostalgie in film as a phenomenon that 'is important not only as a socio-political probe into collective frustrations and thought stereotypes... but equally as a proof that film and photography uncover something essential about the nature of human remembering'.<sup>385</sup> While the writer does not specify what this 'something' is, other quotes indicate that Ostalgie is seen by many of these critics mainly as encouraging the process of forgetting and rewriting history. Repeatedly on the pages of the magazine the memory of cinema is presented as unfaithful, at odds with historiographic authenticity and truthfulness. This connection to film as memory (and a particularly distorted one) can also be glimpsed in the titles of articles: 'What horrible period! What beautiful

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<sup>383</sup> Marešová, 'Svůdný klam poprelikvií', p. 58.

<sup>384</sup> Blanka Činátlová, 'Zátiší se sifonovou lahví', *Cinepur*, 78 (2010), pp. 59-66 (p. 66).

<sup>385</sup> Kolář, 'Téma'.

years!’,<sup>386</sup> or ‘Bad memory and rich recollections’.<sup>387</sup> These titles rely on the contrast between official assessments of the past and the seeming tendency of film and popular television to underplay or avoid this stance.

What these articles indicate, therefore, is the perceived discord between certain representations of the past in cinema and historiographic evaluations of the past. At the same time, these articles show a preference for cinema that would serve and follow these ideas of authenticity. This discourse about cinema’s responsibility towards ideas of historiographic authenticity had a great effect on the perceived role of ‘quality’ Czech cinema not only in elite and academic circles but also in mainstream criticism. As I will show below, critics writing for daily newspapers and magazines employ in their reviews of *Identity Card* similar perceptions of authenticity and value that demand the representation of the past to be shown in its less colourful and more unpleasant reality.

### Critics Keeping Up - New Interpretative Strategies in Reviews

Despite the fact that *Cinepur* aims to represent a branch of criticism that is different from mainstream reviewing (its strapline is ‘Magazine for modern cinephiles’), and the fact that its issue on Ostalgie was released one year after *Identity Card*, reviews of the film show evidence of very similar discourses and concerns. In fact, one review published in a weekly magazine introduces *Identity Card* as a ‘bitter comedy ... that tries to balance between testimony and Ostalgie’.<sup>388</sup> It appears that the term ‘Ostalgie’ as well as its perception as an antithesis to ‘historical testimony’ were already widespread enough for the writer to refer to them without explanation. References to nostalgia, in fact, become in many reviews part of what David Bordwell calls ‘pathetic proofs’. As Bordwell says, ‘Eager to present the film as "news," the reviewer will play up the qualities that he assumes will strike his audience’.<sup>389</sup> The fact that this critic refers to Ostalgie in the introduction to the review as a ‘hook’ for the reader, therefore further indicates the relevance this topic is perceived to have.

We can see the effect of this topical reference in the interpretations of the film’s themes. Even if many critics did not refer to Ostalgie directly, the emphasis on historical representation became the primary focus of all critics. As we saw in the previous chapter, it

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<sup>386</sup> Pinkas, ‘Jak hrozná doba! Jak krásná léta!’.

<sup>387</sup> Hájek and Vlček, ‘Špatná paměť a bohaté vzpomínky’.

<sup>388</sup> Šimon Šafránek, ‘Velmi dlouhá občanka’, *Instinkt*, 21 October 2010, p. 38.

<sup>389</sup> David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 36.

was the family theme that was at the centre of numerous positive evaluations of *Cosy Dens*, with the family conflicts having been seen as constructing a universally familiar and timeless environment. While the family environment also formed an important part in *Identity Card*'s content, reviews referred to it to construct very different arguments. One critic, for instance, finds that *Identity Card* 'gives a faithful message about how twisted the period was and how it twisted young characters, how parents were afraid to speak in front of children and children held contempt for their parents'.<sup>390</sup> *Identity Card* is still therefore about family, but in this reading the universality of the family relations is replaced by the specificity of the period. Conflicts between family members are here not nicely relatable and universal, as was a common interpretation of *Cosy Dens*, but are tied to the period and form an important part of its depiction of the past as dark and twisted.

Another critic, on the other hand, believes that the family conflicts in *Identity Card* prevent it from showing more period specific issues: 'Some sequences, like generational debates between parents and adolescents can take place in any period'.<sup>391</sup> While we could find similar sentences in reviews of *Cosy Dens*, their tones were vastly different. In this review, the universality of family relations is counted among the film's flaws. The critic would have liked to see more detailed depiction of life during the regime. He finds that 'Everyday decisions of "the grey zone" about the extent to which they should conform to the requirements of the regime and maintain their character is therefore indicated only in brief'.<sup>392</sup> Critics therefore identify in *Identity Card* themes similar to *Cosy Dens*, but there is a clear shift in the way these themes are interpreted and evaluated. Family is not the primary meaning of the film anymore and it even seems to have dropped on the scale of valuable topics. The currently topical issue of representation of the communist regime overshadowed it.

A different way of demonstrating the primacy of the historical representation in reviews is the identification of the basic quality critics expect from the film. In the practice of reviewing it is common (or even deemed required) for critics to comment on the film's flaws that exist beside the film's achievements. By bringing attention to the film's imperfections the critic reaffirms their position as a well-informed expert, a learned spectator possessing the keen eye that notices even the slightest departures from the sought but at the same time

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<sup>390</sup> Darina Křivánková, 'Povídky ze zadní kapsy', *Reflex*, 21 October 2010, pp. 74-75 (p. 75).

<sup>391</sup> Jaroslav Šebek, 'Exkurze do éry husákovského dospívání', *Katolický týdeník*, 9 November 2010, p. 8.

<sup>392</sup> Ibid.

impossible 'ideal'. Naming flaws in films is therefore an important part of what Bordwell calls (himself drawing on Aristotle), 'ethical proofs' which 'serve to create an attractive role that will warrant the critic's opinion'.<sup>393</sup> At the same time, flaws, just as virtues are placed on a scale of hierarchy. In a battle of good vs. evil, some flaws simply do not defeat the more significant and overpowering virtues. Some flaws are therefore quickly dismissed by critics as essentially not significantly diminishing a film's final value and the film can therefore pass with the critic's seal of approval. The flaws that can be dismissed in such a way reveal thus the basic quality that the film, the critic thinks, succeeded to capture.

In the reviews of *Identity Card*, the primary reference, the test of quality critics require the film to pass is often tied to its representation of the communist past. Numerous critics were willing to forgive the film its missteps if they could find this essential quality. A rhetoric of 'merciful and sympathetic forgiveness' appears in several reviews. In one newspaper the reviewer says that 'Despite all issues that one can find in the film, it can definitely be recommended for seeing because there still haven't been enough useful trips into the land of pre-November past'.<sup>394</sup> Another critic also finds the film flawed but valuable:

The direction of the film is clear: to remind contemporaries what it was like and to make 'an introduction to new history' for peers of the protagonists.... [W]e can pardon that *Identity Card* sometimes drags, that some scenes are clumsy, others are too static or completely unnecessary. But on the whole, these things luckily do not harm the picture substantially. If we are to go back to the seventies, then why not like this.<sup>395</sup>

To create a transition from the review's evaluative section to the final verdict at the end of the review, the critic dismisses the film's weak points as trivial. Virtually all positive reviews of *Identity Card* followed this structure, but a few posed this transition as the critic above, as 'forgiveness'. The final verdict hinges on the film's success at capturing the past appropriately, rather than on minor 'details' that, the implication is, only a highly observant spectator of the critic's calibre might notice.

While the rhetoric of forgiveness of minor flaws also appeared in several reviews of *Cosy Dens*, it is not so simple to identify a single basic quality across reviews as in the case of *Identity Card*. As I argued in the previous chapter, in the case of *Cosy Dens* it was the variety

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<sup>393</sup> Bordwell, *Making Meaning*, p. 35

<sup>394</sup> Šebek, 'Exkurze do éry husákovského dospívání'.

<sup>395</sup> Křivánková, 'Povídky ze zadní kapsy'.

of elements for broad audiences – familiar situations, ‘tears and laughter’, the best of Czech acting - that were pinpointed and implied to be collectively providing a balanced mix of pleasures. As I also discussed in the previous chapter, the historical topic of *Cosy Dens* actually tended to be treated with some caution in mainstream reviews as it was implied to be potentially overly serious and alienating. Positive reviews therefore tended to assure their readers that it never becomes overly didactic or dull. Compare, for instance, the urgency expressed by the critics quoted above with this review of *Cosy Dens* which also finds the film to be faithfully depicting the atmosphere of the period:

Plastic spoons shrivelled in cups of hot tea, unattractive male boots, or ‘unbreakable’ glasses from a company canteen evoke through the film screen a feeling of precise depiction of the tastelessness and ‘kitchiness’ of that period. Only the first few weeks of screenings can demonstrate if these aspects also manage to capture the interest of young audiences who do not have direct experience with the period. [Director] Hřebejk therefore earns a praise for not overloading his piece with complicated political reflections.<sup>396</sup>

In contrast to the above-quoted review of *Identity Card* by Křivánková who has no doubts that the film’s historical theme is here to fulfil an important function in the maintenance of historical consciousness in all audiences, this critic of *Cosy Dens* is wary of the theme’s attractiveness.

We can therefore see a rapid shift in interpretative strategies of critics writing for mainstream publications. Family situations that formed an important part of *Cosy Dens*’ value are now highlighted only if they are seen as contributing to the film’s depiction of the past. Evaluating the film through the now topical focus on the representation of the past becomes ‘not only legitimate but even necessary’<sup>397</sup> in order to maintain the image of a ‘thinking critic’, as the quote in the introduction put it. Probably the best example of the ‘necessity’ of these references in reviews of *Identity Card* is a review of Mirka Spáčilová writing for the daily newspaper *Mladá fronta Dnes*. While she previously hailed *Cosy Dens* as a well-made ‘sweet family chronicle’, that offers both laughter and drama, and ‘extraordinary parade of Czech acting’,<sup>398</sup> her review of *Identity Card* employs a very different rhetoric: ‘No more kind conciliation, no bitter-sweet idyll .... In contrast to other films from

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<sup>396</sup> Lederer, ‘Hřebejkovy Pelíšky nabízejí nostalgické ohlédnutí za totalitní minlostí’.

<sup>397</sup> Mathijs, ‘AIDS References in the Critical Reception of David Cronenberg’, p. 33.

<sup>398</sup> Spáčilová, ‘Kronika rodičů a dětí se povedla’.

our history, *Identity Card* is not calculating'.<sup>399</sup> Instead she thinks, *Identity Card* 'truthfully tells what it was like' in the 1970s.<sup>400</sup> The film's value, it seems, can now only be negotiated by referencing the topical emphasis on historical representation and employing the rhetoric of differentiation from the comforting 'pretty Czech' style.

### Legitimizing the Genre

The 'necessity' of new topical and rhetorical references can also be noticed in the way critics 'correctly' position themselves towards the film's genre. As Mark Jancovich points out, genre definitions are at the centre of different social groups' claims to cultural authority. Instead of 'having a single meaning, different social groups construct [genre] in different, competing ways as they seek to identify with or distance themselves from the term, and associate different texts with these constructions'.<sup>401</sup> As I indicated above, the nostalgia debates demonstrated specific constructions of the genre of retro-comedy that shifted the perceptions of value of previously praised films such as *Cosy Dens*.<sup>402</sup> This had significant implications especially for critics seeking to praise *Identity Card*. Due to the various connections of the film to the retro genre textually and through creative personnel, critics had to differentiate the film from a usual retro fare.

In his essay on *The Silence of the Lambs*, Jancovich analyses the genre classifications circulating in reviews and publicity texts and the ways the flow of talk in ancillary materials 'tried to negotiate a special status for the film'.<sup>403</sup> He notices that articles often aimed to 'present the film as offering the pleasures associated with the horror movie – that it will be gripping, terrifying, shocking, etc'.<sup>404</sup> However, to frame it for audiences who do not identify as horror fans, they were 'also legitimating the film through its distinction from the genre'.<sup>405</sup> The film's aesthetics, politics and Jodie Foster's star image were commonly debated in ancillary materials to 'detach the film from the horror genre's associations with voyeurism, misogyny and formulaic simplicity'.<sup>406</sup> In a similar vein, mainstream critics praising *Identity*

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<sup>399</sup> Mirka Spáčilová, 'Občanský průkaz: konečně bez idyly', *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 16 October 2010, supplement Scéna, p. 30.

<sup>400</sup> Ibid.

<sup>401</sup> Jancovich, 'Genre and the Audience', p. 43.

<sup>402</sup> *Kolya* seems to be mentioned less often in these discussions, arguably because it had the international validation in the form of an Oscar.

<sup>403</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>404</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid.

<sup>406</sup> Ibid., pp. 42-43.

*Card* had to negotiate a special status for the film which positioned it as a 'higher form' standing above the comforting and nostalgic retro. One critic therefore thinks that 'It's still mainly a comedy, nevertheless in a society inclining towards conciliatory nostalgia, it disrupts like a gunshot at an operetta'.<sup>407</sup> In this one sentence she topically connects the film to current nostalgia debates and adopts the stance of a gate-keeper opposing the comforting pleasures of ordinary retro. The genre of comedy, she indicates, is problematic but permissible in *Identity Card* because it does not have the unwanted nostalgic tendencies. Another critic also states that 'It's an impressive retro that often succeeds in capturing *even* the marasmus of the period' (emphasis mine).<sup>408</sup> This sentence implicitly defines the genre of retro by dissociating it from the harsh connotations 'marasmus' indicates. Instead, in *Identity Card* it is added as an additional flavour to the genre that then justifies the positive evaluation of the film.

However, it can be noticed that this 'differentiation' is quite often mainly rhetorical. The negotiation of a special status for *Identity Card* allows critics to champion the updated values, while still evoking several pleasures that were at the centre of *Cosy Dens'* value. One critic argues that 'in the realm of retro, *Identity Card* is closer to the sharp *Walking Too Fast* than to the typified family saga *Wonderful Years* – and it's still great fun'.<sup>409</sup> On the one hand, she refers to the thriller *Walking Too Fast* to indicate the film's dedication to depicting 'serious' situations from the past. Despite this, the film 'is still great fun' because it balances drama with humorous moments. In this comparison she therefore introduces *Identity Card's* generic pleasures in a way similar to her and other critics' evocation of a blend of tears and laughter in *Cosy Dens*. However, by placing the film on a scale closer to the thriller *Walking Too Fast* she calls upon the updated evaluative frameworks and topical references that require the darkness of historical representation to come to the foreground. Another critic is also positively inclined to the film's plot that depicts the rebellion of teenagers against their parents; she even praises the film's situation humour, but by naming one of her subsections 'Chills down the spine' she indicates what emotive response is higher in hierarchies of value.<sup>410</sup> The distinction between the old and new thus often appears to be a matter of rhetorical emphasis, allowing critics to present *Identity Card* as having many pleasures of previous retro films without threatening their identity as serious gate-keepers.

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<sup>407</sup> Spáčilová, 'Občanský průkaz: konečně bez idyly'.

<sup>408</sup> Irena Hejdová, 'Jak se (ne)vymanit z Pelíšků', *Týden*, 25 October 2010, p. 67.

<sup>409</sup> Spáčilová, 'Občanský průkaz: konečně bez idyly'.

<sup>410</sup> Jana Podskalská, 'Občanský průkaz: silné scény', *Pražský deník*, 21 October 2010, p. 15.



## Re-evaluation as Middlebrow Reverence

As can be seen, critics writing for more mainstream publications have somewhat shifted their focus from escapist pleasures and instead place much more emphasis on aspects that disrupt the spectator's sense of comfort. As I argued in the previous chapter, emphasis on these aspects were especially employed by critics aiming to associate themselves with higher tastes in reception of *Kolya* and *Cosy Dens*. As Bordwell points out, film reviewers routinely 'rely on emotional appeals to the audience' through a variety of strategies. Highlighting emotional qualities of the reviewed film is only one of them.<sup>411</sup> In this case the shift in responses that are described sympathetically is the most interesting. The value of comforting pleasures now gives way to emphasis on feelings of anxiety and discomfort. Describing the film as 'chilling', or at least highlighting specific scenes from the film that evoke that response, was commonly cited in reviews as being among the film's strengths. One scene in particular was used by several critics as a typical example of the film's emotional resonance. In this scene the protagonist's family is subjected to a search on national borders. Police officers thoroughly search the family's car, suitcases, and private belongings before finally sending them back home when it transpires that the family was secretly planning to emigrate instead of going on holiday. Mirka Spáčilová for example says that the 'Humiliating scene at customs brings contemporaries the clenching feeling in the stomach, a mixture of fear and powerless anger'.<sup>412</sup> These were not the only moments that were uncomfortable, however. Spáčilová manages to evoke an impressive amount of unpleasant emotive responses in her description of one scene and include them in the list of the film's virtues. She continues: 'similarly, comrade trial after sweaty teacher sex that radiates awkwardness and shame reminds what zeros used to destroy people's lives'.<sup>413</sup> Furthermore, she assures that even audiences who did not live during communism are not going to have a comforting experience. She seems to be glad that these feelings are 'luckily transferable. If nothing else, even teenagers born in freedom will be affected by a hard moment in which their peers discover their idol to be a pathetic rat'.<sup>414</sup> Affective responses disrupting the idea of cinema as a comforting experience are explicitly tied to value in this case.

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<sup>411</sup> Bordwell, *Making Meaning*, pp. 39-37.

<sup>412</sup> Spáčilová, 'Občanský průkaz: konečně bez idyly'.

<sup>413</sup> Ibid.

<sup>414</sup> Ibid.

One of the characteristics through which the middlebrow culture has been described is its reverence for legitimate culture. It is therefore often connected to ideas of social mobility, aspirations, 'adaptability and adaptation'.<sup>415</sup> Jancovich argues that the middlebrow displays 'an admiration for legitimate culture that is founded on [its] sense of exclusion from it'.<sup>416</sup> I interpret the re-evaluation of the old 'pretty Czech' retro and the shift in critics' evaluative strategies and emphasis on discomfort as part of this process of admiration and adaptability. One example of this reverence can be found in an article in the daily newspaper *Mladá fronta Dnes* published in 2003. The film section is on the one hand still praising the newly released *Pupendo* for its humanism, kindness 'generous gesture of national conciliation' and focus on 'purely human moments' instead of 'direct politics' on the grounds that this is a 'family comedy' and not a political film.<sup>417</sup> However, another article reverses a more refined taste. In an article published as part of the newspaper's series 'Influential People of the City of Prague', the cultural preferences of the Director of the National Gallery are examined. The reader finds out not only about his love for the early work of the Rolling Stones and adoration for string quartets but also his opinion on *Kolya*. As the article states: 'This artist is also one of the harshest critics of former president Václav Havel.... Head of the gallery also doesn't like the Oscar-winning *Kolya*, because it's supposedly "demented" and he declared the sculptor Olbram Zoubek to be a "kitsch-maker"'.<sup>418</sup> The personality does not explain or justify his opinions in this article. This series of statements merely aim to form an image of a transgressive artist with opinions in opposition to what is considered to be 'consensual'. Furthermore, they serve not only as markers of a different taste but are presented in an aspirational light. Despite not being a review, this article also enables the readers 'to position themselves within hierarchies of taste'.<sup>419</sup> The series as a whole in fact seems to rely on the appeal of showing the tastes of people in influential positions and emphasises the importance of cultural consumption as part of one's social position.

When it comes to reverence held for the legitimate taste, there is also a lot to be said about the respect critics like Stankovič and Cieslar seemed to have held in their field. As I argued in the previous chapter, Cieslar and Stankovič often opposed in their articles the

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<sup>415</sup> Napper, *British Cinema and Middlebrow Culture in the Interwar Years*, p. 10.

<sup>416</sup> Mark Jancovich, 'Naked Ambitions: Pornography, Taste and the Problem of the Middlebrow', *Scope*, June 2001, available at <<https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/scope/documents/2001/june-2001/jancovich.pdf>> [accessed 11 September 2019], p. 9.

<sup>417</sup> Mirka Spáčilová, 'Ohňostroj smíchu z neveselých časů', *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 27 March 2003, supplement Svět diktátorů, p. c/11.

<sup>418</sup> Jan Ziegler, 'Knížák tvrdí - Kolja je dementní', *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 24 October 2003.

<sup>419</sup> Jancovich, 'Genre and the Audience', p. 37.

opinions of what they found to be lower taste formations. Furthermore, almost all Stankovič's articles were collected and reprinted in several collections, demonstrating thus an aim to 'preserve' his work. Similarly, after Cieslar's death in 2005 one film critic found the large number of obituaries published in newspapers surprising. Countless articles were written, celebrating Cieslar's life work and presenting him as the 'greatest Czech critic' of immense influence.<sup>420</sup> The article finds it surprising since Cieslar's name was unlikely to be known beyond the circles of journalists and elites and therefore to a large portion of the newspapers' audiences. According to him, 'Jiří Cieslar's obituaries were a symptom of a desire for a father figure and a guru'.<sup>421</sup>

Of course, it is impossible to clearly state to what extent (and if) critics were 'influenced' by the values and opinions expressed by other critics. However, the idea of middlebrow instability and aspirations seems useful to describe the harmony in which the quality of the pretty Czech style was being dismissed in reviews of *Identity Card* as outdated, and the focus on the unpleasant was instead adopted as a marker of quality. As Jancovich points out, the new petit bourgeoisie is in a state of anxiety and is driven by desires to avoid being judged.<sup>422</sup> It therefore adopts a 'learning-mode towards life' and pursues edification 'in the field of taste, style, lifestyle'.<sup>423</sup> Part of this dynamic is also the rejection of the values of the old petite bourgeoisie.<sup>424</sup> While the old bourgeoisie relied on the tactic of 'respectability and restraint' in their social and cultural aspirations, the new petite bourgeoisie dismisses this tactic as "'outmoded" and "fuddy-duddy"'.<sup>425</sup> While Jancovich is mainly interested in the views of the middlebrow on sexuality (and also in a different national context and even century), a similar rhetoric of distancing from the old, outdated style of the pretty Czech film, compared to the bold aesthetic that is required from new films set in the past, appear in the reception of *Identity Card*. One critic thinks that '*Identity Card* still belongs to the same family but out of all of the siblings it is the cheekiest one, the one with most ripped jeans and longest hair'.<sup>426</sup> To highlight the value of the new style of *Identity Card* in opposition to the old 'pretty Czech' retro, the difference seems to be in the new film's rejection of ideas of respectability. For the purpose of my argument, however, the rhetorics employed to reject the old style

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<sup>420</sup> Kamil Fila, 'Nekrolog(y) za Jiřího Cieslara', *Cinepur*, 44 (2006), available at <<http://cinepur.cz/article.php?article=1009>> [accessed 11 September 2019].

<sup>421</sup> Ibid.

<sup>422</sup> Mark Jancovich, 'Naked Ambitions', p. 9.

<sup>423</sup> Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (London: SAGE Publications, 2007), p. 88.

<sup>424</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction*, pp. 365-367.

<sup>425</sup> Jancovich, 'Naked Ambitions', p. 9.

<sup>426</sup> Křivánková, 'Povídky ze zadní kapsy', p. 74.

are less important than the act of rejection itself. Like the differentiation between ‘the thinking’ from the ‘non-thinking critics’, it distances the writer from previous ideas of quality and instead establishes his dedication to ‘keeping up’ with correct values.

I have so far outlined the shift in notions of value and quality in criticism. Previously praised comforting qualities of *Cosy Dens* have gone out of favour and instead were replaced by emphasis on historical representation of the communist regime, especially its unpleasant and dark aspects. I argued that these shifts were influenced by ongoing nostalgia debates that placed pressure on cinema to adhere to historiographic values and notions of authenticity. Critics also use the construct of ‘old retro’ as a generic category that does not have place in current ideas about valuable cinema. The discursive nature of ‘the old’ can be seen especially in positive reviews of the film in which critics describe *Identity Card*, very familiarly, as a family film that oscillates between ‘tears and laughter’ but disguise the similarities between the old and the new by using updated rhetorical and topical references. I see adoption of these topical and rhetorical references in the reception of *Identity Card* as part of their claims to authority. By making references to nostalgia and highlighting especially the discomfiting aspects of the film’s historical representation, critics demonstrate their sensitivity to topical issues and by extension, are ‘making criticism of these films a culturally relevant enterprise’.<sup>427</sup>

I would now like to turn to the promotional campaign of *Identity Card* and to the ways it aimed to appeal to the new notions of quality by differentiating the film from the generic label of retro, or at least connotations of ‘nostalgic remembering’ it was being associated with. The purpose of this section is to explore the shift in notions of cinema quality as a response to discourses about the ‘popular’ and analyse the implications of this shift for discourses about the nature and role of national cinema.

### Appealing to Middlebrow Audiences: Retro and the Pleasant

I demonstrated above how certain aspects of the genre of retro were pushed out of notions of quality and value. However, this perception was not perceived to be the opinion of the ‘general public’. In fact, in the years following the release of *Cosy Dens*, “retro film” has become recognised as a genre with a considerable popular pull. This perception can be glimpsed in an article written shortly before *Identity Card* opened in cinemas. In the article

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<sup>427</sup> Mathijs, ‘AIDS References in the Critical Reception of David Cronenberg’, p. 33.

published in the economy-focussed broadsheet *Hospodářské noviny*, titled 'Excursion to normalisation attracts people to cinemas', the writer highlights the success of previous films set in the past: '*Cosy Dens* has become a cult film in ten years, *The Rebels* and *Big Beat* are also liked, and now *Identity Card* is heading to cinemas'.<sup>428</sup> The writer is of the opinion that *Identity Card* will easily find its audience. In a familiar rhetoric that connects films set in the past to spectacular attractions of the 'surface sheen', this writer defines the genre through its reliance on period attractions: 'Backcombed hair, omnipresent plastics, soft plush, glass blocks, vinyl records, polyester trousers simply work like a magnet on the domestic spectator'.<sup>429</sup> Even before *Identity Card* is released, it is already predicted to become a hit. The director, we read, 'doesn't have to worry about attendance. Normalisation is not going to get out of fashion anytime soon'.<sup>430</sup>

*Identity Card* was therefore seemingly entering cinemas with the advantage of being part of a popular trend. Interestingly, however, box office figures give little evidence that 'retro pulls people like a magnet' to cinemas. While *Cosy Dens* and *The Rebels* (*Rebelové*, Filip Renč, 2001) were in the top five highest grossing films in their respective years (the first in 1999 and the fourth in 2001, respectively), the years preceding the release of *Identity Card* do not indicate that audiences preferred this genre over others.<sup>431</sup> After *Pupendo* topped the box office in 2003, normalisation disappeared from box office top ten. Films set in more distant pasts occasionally registered success in the box office; *I Served the King of England* (*Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále*; Jiří Menzel, 2007) took the second place, *Bathory* (Juraj Jakubisko, 2008) topped the box office in 2008.<sup>432</sup> However, these were not 'excursions to normalisation', as the writer calls them. Similarly, cinematic releases of German manifestations of the genre such as international hits *Good Bye, Lenin!* (Wolfgang Becker, 2003) and *The Lives of Others* (*Das Leben der Anderen*; Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, 2006) did not place in top places in the Czech Republic at the time of their release.<sup>433</sup> It is not my aim to accuse the writer of intentionally misleading her readers when writing about the success of films set in the normalisation era in cinemas. Instead, I believe she was simply writing with the perception of normalisation as being a current trend in popular media in general. It is this perception of retro as a popular trend that interests me and the ways the

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<sup>428</sup> Irena Zemanová, 'Trojan je zpět v normalizaci', *Hospodářské noviny*, 28 April 2009, p. 28.

<sup>429</sup> Ibid.

<sup>430</sup> Ibid.

<sup>431</sup> Unie filmových distributorů, *TOP 50 - roční výsledky*, 30 August 2010, available at: <<https://www.ufd.cz/prehledy-statistiky/top-50-rocni-vysledky?page=1>> [accessed 6 July 2020].

<sup>432</sup> Ibid.

<sup>433</sup> Ibid.

promotion of *Identity Card* navigates around this perception in order to appeal to audiences identifying with the changed values of the middlebrow taste formation.

As I mentioned above, Ostalgie debates are entwined with worries about media effects. As is often the case, writers worrying about such detrimental effects often support their arguments by constructing abstract figures of audience susceptible to the film's effects.<sup>434</sup> To conclude her argument about the lack of value of the TV series *Wonderful Times*, a prominent example of the nostalgia wave, Blanka Činátlová writing in *Cinepur* refers to the 'hypochondriacs of heart' the show 'creates' through its modes of historical representation. The figure of the hypochondriac of heart serves as a rhetorical device that helps to give urgency and relevance to her argument by relating the analysis of the TV series to broader societal issues. By being exposed to nostalgic culture, the viewer the critic speaks of is caught in constant recollection of pleasant personal memories and has supposedly no or at best a distorted sense of historical consciousness. At the same time, however, such worries about effects are often tied to claims to superiority. Opposite the figure of a susceptible viewer there is the role of the healthy commentator that the writer assumes. The healthy commentator, through their dismissal of the dangerous culture, claims to possess the required cultural capital to be immune to the unhealthy effects. However, as Barker, Arthurs and Harindranath point out, resorting to the construction of abstract figures of audiences under danger from media effects can be seen as simply masking differences in taste.<sup>435</sup>

In this regard, it is telling that the arguments about the dangers of nostalgia are tied to, and even draw urgency from its perceived popularity. Another rhetoric present in articles about nostalgia's prominence presents it as a sign of deterioration of the popular taste. Writers of *Cinepur* commonly reference the success of the TV series *Wonderful Times* and reruns of TV shows made during the communist era as evidence of nostalgia's prominence in Czech society. The popular success of TV reruns, for instance, is in these articles often an issue because they do not have enough artistic merit. The new TV channel Barrandov especially built its early programming on reruns of shows from the period. One critic comments on this programming strategy as follows: 'no sewer was too dirty for it to not have a rummage and discover some hidden gem'.<sup>436</sup> These shows, it is implied, are getting

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<sup>434</sup> Barker, 'News, Reviews, Clues, Interviews and Other Ancillary Materials', p. 12, see also Barker, Arthurs and Harindranath, *The Crash Controversy*, pp. 7-10.

<sup>435</sup> Barker, Arthurs and Harindranath, *The Crash Controversy*, p. 9.

<sup>436</sup> Pinkas, 'Jak hrozná doba! Jak krásná léta!', p. 67.

recognition they do not deserve according to the taste of the author. Another author presents 2011 as the year popular taste suffered especially: 'When on 2 April 2011 Czech nation announced *Wonderful Times* as the absolute winner of the survey TýTý [Czech version of National Television Awards], and when online broadcasts of ČT1 show *Retro* started achieving admirable viewership, and when the last DVD of *Good Bye, Lenin* disappeared from shelves, the Czech public finally discovered a term that had been giving wrinkles to [i.e. worrying] our Western neighbours for some time'.<sup>437</sup> It is obviously not true that discourses, debates, even the term Ostalgie emerged in the Czech Republic only in 2011 (for instance Franc used the term in 2008). The writer merely evokes the popularity of these cultural products to give relevance to her analysis and to present it as 'news', as Bordwell says.<sup>438</sup> Importantly, it is this growing popularity that had been 'giving wrinkles to' (the learned and immune) Western neighbours and is now a reason for worry even in the Czech Republic.

We therefore need to see critics' arguments distinguishing *Identity Card* from nostalgic tendencies as attempts to distance the film from low, popular taste. By referring to nostalgia as unwanted in cinematic depictions of the past, critics also reaffirm their positions as audiences differing from those swayed by low pleasures. This, of course, also indicates what kind of audience the critics see themselves as addressing with their reviews. By praising *Identity Card* as a fresh intervention 'in a society inclining towards conciliatory nostalgia',<sup>439</sup> the critic frames the film as one for those audiences who expect something more from their cinema-going than 'just' comforting pleasures of current popular culture. As Tim Bergfelder points out, 'prestige and quality encompass aspirations relating both to the films themselves and to their audiences, and these aspirations are crucial in creating hierarchies of value and maintaining regimes of taste'.<sup>440</sup>

This framing of *Identity Card* for audiences seeking to differentiate themselves from 'ordinary' viewers of television swayed by the popular nostalgia trend can also be noticed in the film's promotional campaign. As Cagle notes in his essay on Hollywood prestige films, the emergence of the social problem film in the late 1940s was a result of a 'mutually influential process'.<sup>441</sup> On the one hand the growing acceptance of cinema as an art form led to a shift of critics' (and audiences') perceptions of value. On the other hand, the industry also started appealing to this taste formation and incorporated updated notions of quality into their

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<sup>437</sup> Marešová, 'Svůdný klam poprelikvií', p. 56.

<sup>438</sup> Bordwell, *Making Meaning*, p. 36.

<sup>439</sup> Spáčilová, 'Občanský průkaz: konečně bez idylly'.

<sup>440</sup> Bergfelder, 'Popular European Cinema in the 2000s', p. 44.

<sup>441</sup> Cagle, 'Two Modes of Prestige Film', p. 294.

prestige dramas. Cagle notices that producers were occasionally consciously seeking to attract positive critical reception. As a result, this 'desire for recognition influenced their marketing strategy'.<sup>442</sup> The promotional campaign of *Identity Card* does not necessarily indicate that the producers were intentionally appealing to critics per se – there is little evidence of this in my data. However, its promotional campaign in the press shows awareness of the shifts in perceptions of relevance.

The promotion aims to construct the film as a socially relevant version of a familiar genre. It specifically employs topical references to appeal to the taste familiar with the nostalgia debates and worries about historical consciousness. The family audience is here not invited to look at familiar situations and escape from politics, as was the promise in the promotion of *Cosy Dens*. Instead, the film's representation of life in the past is commonly put forward in articles as a major interpretative angle. It is also promised to be the 'right' version of the past, rid of nostalgic sentiments. The director stresses in an interview that '[t]he film didn't come to be out of sentiment but from an inner desire to show the misery of that period, of growing up in the lack of freedom, which we are willing to forget today'.<sup>443</sup> In this statement he constructs the film as of particular social relevance, employing several of the terms of the nostalgia debates. The film takes up its role as 'memory work' to remind the audience what the past was like. Furthermore, it emphasises the 'right' memories, that, it is implied, have been neglected by the sentimental appeals of television channels. Similarly, the social work implied to be performed on families in the audience relies on a creation of what Marianne Hirsch calls 'postmemory' through which the young generation gets to experience the past and construct its understanding of it.<sup>444</sup> In another article a supporting actor explains his intention to bring his children with him to the opening night: 'It's going to be a great lesson for them – better than when you try to tell them your own memories'.<sup>445</sup> The director himself is presented as making the film 'with his own sons in mind' and the importance of imparting memories of his past to their generation.<sup>446</sup> This was still a family film that was to perform a kind of social work, but the nature of this work shifted in line with changing notions of value.

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<sup>442</sup> Ibid., p. 310.

<sup>443</sup> Ondřej Trojan quoted in Věra Míšková, 'Petr Jarchovský se vrací k Petrovi Šabachovi', *Právo*, 14 October 2010, supplement Film, p. 3.

<sup>444</sup> Marianne Hirsch, 'Family Pictures: Maus, Mourning, and Post-Memory', *Discourse*, 15.2 (1992), 3-29.

<sup>445</sup> Václav Kopta quoted in Mirka Spáčilová 'Občanský průkaz slibuje smích, ne však idylku', *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 30 September 2010, p. 8.

<sup>446</sup> Ondřej Trojan quoted in Ibid.



To underline the film's adherence to topical notions of value, promotional campaign employs the rhetoric of distinction to distance the film from the pleasures of nostalgic culture and previous films that are now deemed to be part of that culture. In another brief article with a behind-the-scenes story the journalist describes a scene from the film to give the readers a 'sneak peak'. In the scene in question a young high-school teacher (Kristýna Boková) is interrogated by her colleagues for poor conduct. Based on this scene, the writer concludes: 'Brr... this doesn't look like some kind *Cosy Dens 2* at all'.<sup>447</sup> This film was therefore meant to represent a break from a cycle rather than its continuation, especially in terms of its tone, which was meant to be less kind and conciliatory. Another article similarly states that '[c]ompared to other retro-comedies or series, *Identity Card* doesn't have the taste of idyll'.<sup>448</sup> This writer found it to be an especially important point since the article itself was titled '*Identity Card* promises laughter, but not idyll'.<sup>449</sup> At other times, completely new generic terms were brought into the discourse. The scriptwriter, for instance clarifies that the film is 'not a nostalgic remembering this time but an epic story'.<sup>450</sup> He shifts the attention from nostalgia to evoke a sense of scale and distance the film from the connotations of sentimental longing for the past.

These quotes are meant to set expectations for the film, but it is interesting that they do so in contrast to films that are likely to be perceived as similar. On the one hand, the rhetoric of differentiation is not unusual in promotional campaigns of films. Highlighting different attributes currently seen as successful in box office is a common strategy for attracting cross-over audiences.<sup>451</sup> Similarly, selling a film through promises of familiarity as well as innovation is not unusual. Often it is not important whether the film is truly 'innovative' or not, it is the meaning and implications of these differentiations that are more interesting. After all, as I discussed above, it is possible to see the claims to innovation and difference as rather rhetorical, achieved through different emphases rather than a sign of significant shifts in representation.<sup>452</sup> However, these claims to distinction evoke not only attempts to broaden the audience appeal but instead to contain interpretations and the terms associated with the film. As Austin points out in his analysis of the flow of talk around

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<sup>447</sup> Anon., 'Šabach v Trojanově režii', *Premier*, June 2009, p. 15.

<sup>448</sup> Spáčilová, 'Občanský průkaz slibuje smích, ne však idylku'.

<sup>449</sup> Ibid.

<sup>450</sup> Petr Jarchovský quoted in Gabriela Koulová, 'Jak se čipovalo do stáda', *Cinema*, January 2010, pp. 6-7 (p. 7).

<sup>451</sup> See Austin, *Hollywood, Hype and Audiences*.

<sup>452</sup> For a similar point see also Austin's discussion of the importance of 'romance' in promotion of *Bram Stoker's Dracula* as a way of distinction from other adaptations of the novel (pp. 116-125).

*Basic Instinct*, the industry 'encourages and attempts to regulate talk about film' by 'accommodat[ing] a limited proliferation of permissible viewing strategies'.<sup>453</sup> He notes the strategies creative personnel working on the film employed in interviews to counter the perception that the film was homophobic. Similarly, the variety of articles published before the release of *Identity Card* remind readers that the film is not to be read as a 'nostalgic remembering'.

There is, however, a considerable difference in the way producers of these two films tried to regulate the unwanted reading strategies. In the case Austin analyses, the interpretation of *Basic Instinct* as homophobic first had to be introduced in the flow by groups beyond the circle of producers. It posed a threat not least because it potentially alienated a portion of the audience. In contrast to this, the producers of *Identity Card* seem to be anticipating the unwanted readings in advance and are reacting to terms already attached to the genre. In the case of *Identity Card*, the attempts to contain the variety of permissible interpretations is important for the film's claims to social relevance. The past in it is presented as so authentic that it can even be used as a valuable history lesson. However, young audiences are not the only ones who can benefit from seeing such a perspective on the past. As the director claims, the film 'didn't come to be out of sentiment but from an inner desire to show the misery of that period, of growing up in the lack of freedom, which we are willing to forget today'.<sup>454</sup> 'We' in this statement does not seem to refer only to him and his family but stands for the nation as a whole. At the same time, the statement has an aspect of 'cultivation' to it. On the one hand, the nation is presented to be in a process of 'forgetting'. On the other hand, it is indicated that those audiences who will come see the film will be 'reminded' and will make a step from this unwanted forgetting. This claim to distinction therefore does not only serve to broaden the film's audience but to appeal to a specific kind of aspirational audience, that seeks more than the base pleasures of the popular culture of forgetting.

### New Quality vs. Television

It is important to again recall the role of television in the nostalgia debates. While the article in *Hospodářské noviny* sees representations of normalisation as a cinematic trend, as I said above, it had not really manifested itself as a particularly successful box office attraction in

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<sup>453</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>454</sup> Trojan quoted in Míšková, 'Petr Jarchovský se vrací k Petrovi Šabachovi'.

the last few years. It is perhaps telling that the only more recent example of the trend's popularity that the writer gives is *Wonderful Times*. To support her claim that 'normalisation will not go out of fashion any time soon', the writer points out that the show's 'viewership, currently in prime time every Friday, reaches one million viewers'.<sup>455</sup> Similarly, as I outlined above, a large part of the Ostalgie-focussed issue of *Cinepur* highlights the popularity of old television programmes as well as new shows focussing on the communist past (especially *Wonderful Times*, which they refer to quite prominently).<sup>456</sup> Furthermore, *Kolya* and *Cosy Dens* have also been safely incorporated into television culture in the years following their release. In his analysis of *Kolya* Jan Čulík finds the film's mode of representation to be contributing to the culture of forgetting, the danger of which is intensified by the wide reach of television. He says that 'The dangers of this kind of film which is often shown on television is that the kitschy, sentimental picture of reality can push out authentic experience from the consciousness of people with limited memory'.<sup>457</sup> Similarly, *Cosy Dens* had become a staple of Christmas television programming. One commentator writing in 2008 argues that 'those who love *Cosy Dens* and cannot imagine Christmas peace without it appreciate its conciliatory tone'.<sup>458</sup> In fact, it is possible to catch *Cosy Dens* several times each Christmas season on several Czech and Slovak channels. The 'comfort' of the pleasures initially highlighted in many of the film's ancillary materials published around its release have now been joined by the comfort of the season it is associated with.

The claims to differentiation in the promotion and reception of *Identity Card* therefore give a strong impression of attempts to negotiate a place for national quality cinema in opposition to the pleasures of television. While the notions of 'old' quality – kindness and comfort – moved more thoroughly into the realm of television entertainment, voices demanding cinema to construct itself as a 'higher' form gained enough prominence that the industry responded to it. Occasionally producers strengthened these claims to superiority by evoking discourses of high art. In one instance the director refers to the film as a painting. The comparison was used to justify the length of the film (140 minutes) which was questioned by several interviewers (and critics) as excessive. The director answers saying that the length was necessary for the film's status as a socially relevant work. He argues: 'If I

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<sup>455</sup> Zemanová, 'Trojan je zpět v normalizaci'.

<sup>456</sup> This is again not dissimilar from the German context where the TV show *Ostalgie* is often cited to have coined the term. See Anthony Enns, 'The Politics of Ostalgie: Post-Socialist Nostalgia in Recent German Film', *Screen*, 48.4 (2007), 475-491, pp. 475-476.

<sup>457</sup> Čulík, *Jací sme*, p. 90.

<sup>458</sup> Milan Fridrich, 'O českém sporu o Pelíšky', *Pražský deník*, 7 January 2008, p. 20.

didn't accentuate these ritual and typical commie scenes, the film would lose its urgency further down the line and instead of a painting there would be a colouring book'.<sup>459</sup> To justify his decisions, the director evokes the idea of artistic necessity. Without this decision it seems that the film would have been of much lower cultural value. Similarly, in another interview he explains the length of a specific scene as a 'necessary suffering' that was required to faithfully capture the past: 'I understand that the scene of receiving IDs might be quite excruciating for people who remember the period. I wanted everyone to fully go through the hell of that harassing police ritual, to suffer through it as if they were there'.<sup>460</sup> Together with other articles and reviews that emphasise the period's darkness, these ancillary materials sometimes construct the viewing experience as a matter of endurance rather than pleasure which, as Geoff King points out, is commonly associated with art cinema.<sup>461</sup>

This importance placed on distinction from the popular is markedly different from criteria that were being used to classify quality filmmaking a decade ago. As I argued in previous chapters, *Kolya* and *Cosy Dens* were met with critical appraisal in popular press partly because of the attributes that were considered to be welcoming to broad audiences. I argued that critics were evoking ideas of cinema traditions that constructed Czech cinema as popular. After the drastic drop in cinema attendance in the 1990s, several critics welcomed *Kolya* and *Cosy Dens* as films that finally attracted Czech audiences back to cinemas. Despite the continued relative success of Czech films in domestic box office, cinema attendance never returned to pre-1989 levels, however. While there are several reasons usually cited for this drop in attendance (including rising ticket prices and technological outdatedness of cinemas at the time), one of them is the increase in the variety of television programming.<sup>462</sup> New commercial channels started airing in the whole country in 1994 and introduced people to many programmes unavailable until then. The shifts in evaluative strategies can therefore be partly interpreted as a response to the changing status and popularity of cinema itself. In one article published in 2005, critic Kamil Fila talks about the changing demographics and tastes of certain audience segments. He notices the emergence of a new generation of young critics and cinephiles. According to him, these are the people who 'go to the cinema most often, participate at film festival, download films and generally

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<sup>459</sup> Lenka Nejezchlebová, 'Jsem fotrovsky rozněžnělý', *Týden*, 25 October 2010, pp. 64-7 (p. 66).

<sup>460</sup> Ibid.

<sup>461</sup> Geoff King, *Positioning Art Cinema: Film and Cultural Value* (London; New York: I. B. Tauris, 2019), p. 2.

<sup>462</sup> See for example Hames, 'Czech Cinema: From State Industry to Competition'.

live on film'.<sup>463</sup> At the same time, Fila argues that the taste of this audience 'indicates that film is becoming an exclusive type of entertainment similar to theatre'.<sup>464</sup> Indeed, as Cagle describes, cinema has often turned to theatre and literature to endow it with a sense of prestige and legitimacy.<sup>465</sup> There is less evidence that Czech cinema of the post-socialist period extensively drew on theatre in the same way, but the comparison between the statuses of the two art forms in cultural hierarchies as a relatively new development suggests changing perceptions about the role of cinema.

The changing face of Czech cinema can perhaps also be glimpsed in one article published in the daily newspaper *Lidové noviny* seven years before the release of *Identity Card*. In this article, film critic Tomáš Baldýnský laments the status of Czech film canon, or as it is sometimes referred to in the country, 'the Gold Fund of cinema' ('Zlatý fond kinematografie'). Baldýnský describes several criteria for inclusion in this canon and bemoans the disappearance of these attributes from recently made films. He defines the Gold Fund of Czech cinema along the idea of 'quality family entertainment':

A condition for being included in the Gold Fund is not only the ability to outlive its period (in the words of television announcers, it has to be "ageless" or "evergreen") but also its genre (comedy or fairy tale) and furthermore some ecumenic quality, thanks to which even Grandma and Daddy will watch and those less cynical teenagers will even stop typing texts at certain scenes.<sup>466</sup>

His impetus for writing the article seems to be the state of Christmas programming on Czech TV channels; mainly the fact that channels keep broadcasting the same old films every Christmas. It is not quite that he wants the channels to broaden their offer, it is instead the state of Czech cinema he has an issue with. According to him, Czech filmmakers have not produced enough good films in recent years that would deserve a place in the season's programme. The inclusion in the canon is on the one hand a matter of quality ('agelessness'), but Baldýnský places the final word about film's inclusion in the canon in the hands of 'ordinary' audiences. He argues that the 'TV programming of Christmas and New Year represents a kind of testing field for national cinema'.<sup>467</sup> The implication is that only the film's continued popularity with audiences cements its place in the canon. Baldýnský's definition

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<sup>463</sup> Kamil Fila, 'Zdejší filmaři: rozbředlí a ubití', *Hospodářské noviny*, 8 July 2005, p. 9.

<sup>464</sup> Ibid.

<sup>465</sup> Cagle, 'Two Modes of Prestige Film', p. 294.

<sup>466</sup> Tomáš Baldýnský, 'Zlatý fond naší národní kinematografie krachuje', *Lidové noviny*, 31 December 2003.

<sup>467</sup> Ibid.

of national cinema is therefore intimately tied to the acceptance of film by abstract figures of family audiences who, it seems, have the decisive word rather than elite notions of aesthetics and artistic value. Of course, it is possible to see the popular Gold Fund as only one canon existing alongside other canons of national cinema negotiated by different groups. In his article, however, it is presented as *the* canon.

While this is the opinion of only one critic, it is interesting that Baldýnský seems to be complaining about the disappearance of films relying on the comforting pleasures that were increasingly disappearing from perceptions of value. In this context it is perhaps not surprising that he identifies *Cosy Dens* as the last film to have joined the canon since, as he finds, family films are barely made in the country anymore.<sup>468</sup> Baldýnský's article thus seems to be a response ignited by the shifting notions of cinema quality and priorities of the industry. While he defines national cinema and television as being closely linked in offering comforting pleasures for the whole family, as I demonstrated throughout this chapter, film critics increasingly negotiated cinema's place in opposition to these pleasures.

## Conclusions

In this chapter I looked at the reception and promotion of *Identity Card* to show the changing perceptions of quality in national cinema. I demonstrated the shift in evaluative strategies and notions of value that had transpired in the years between its release and the release of *Cosy Dens*. The focus on comforting pleasures of the retro film disappeared from critics' evaluative strategies and was replaced by the film's historical representation as the main focus. I looked at this shift as a reaction of critics to topical debates about the prevalence of nostalgia in Czech culture. Associated especially with retro-comedies and being seen as an inauthentic representation of the communist past, terms and concerns of the nostalgia debates became key topical and rhetorical references in interpretations and evaluations of *Identity Card*. They became so prominent that they give the impression of being necessary rhetorical references through which critics demonstrate their sensitivity to topical issues and maintain their claims to authority.

At the same time, I argued that this shift in evaluative strategies also presented a shift in perceptions about the nature and role of national quality cinema. This was especially evident in the continuous attempts to differentiate the film from 'the old', and the popular.

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<sup>468</sup> Ibid.

I looked at how the nostalgia debates were tied to concerns about effects of popular culture, and especially television, on audiences. The struggles to differentiate *Identity Card* from the popular are noticeably different from claims to quality made on behalf of films analysed in previous chapters – these relied more commonly on escapist and comforting pleasures that were in turn connected to ideas of traditions (at least in mainstream press). I therefore interpreted the omnipresence of new topical and rhetorical references as part of a re-negotiation of a new place for national cinema. I will continue to analyse this new role in the following chapter.

## Chapter 4: Cutting Ties with the Term 'Czech Film': Genre, Extremity and Canons

Towards the end of 2000s Czech film journalists noticed an increase in the number of productions depicting the national past. These new films were especially interesting to writers because they promised to offer a different tone than what was thought to be the norm in Czech cinema. One critic observed that 'While bitter, sad or family comedies ruled over Czech cinema of the last years, it shouldn't be that way in the near future.... Humour slowly stops being the dominant engine of Czech film and will be replaced by a more serious theme'.<sup>469</sup> Another critic concurs: 'Filmmakers have decided: there have been enough retro comedies. History can also be looked at in different ways ... Even if only half of the announced projects got made, it would still mean a new thematic wave'.<sup>470</sup> In this chapter I want to focus on one specific example from this new cycle of 'serious' films about the past – *Walking Too Fast* – and analyse the discourses that formed its flow of talk in ancillary materials. While I do not intend to suggest that the discourses analysed in this chapter were the only or the primary reason behind the emergence of this cycle as a whole, it is my argument that the emergence of *Walking Too Fast* was preceded by several developments in critical discourses. Following the theme of the previous chapter, this chapter therefore continues to explore the shifts in discourses about notions of quality in Czech cinema transpiring in late 2000s. In this chapter, I continue to analyse discourses about pleasures expected in a film of cultural value, but I also pay more attention to discourses about genre purity.

After its release, *Walking Too Fast* was generally critically lauded. It won the Best Film (among other categories) at the inaugural Czech Film Critics' Awards. Reviews often spoke of the film's surprising courageousness: 'It's an unprecedented brave attempt', says one critic.<sup>471</sup> Another critic felt that despite some of the film's shortcomings, 'It brings to Czech film something that hasn't been here yet'.<sup>472</sup> For some, *Walking Too Fast* was nothing less than the film they had been wanting to see for twenty years.<sup>473</sup> Commenting on the positive reception the film received, one critic argued that the film was enthusiastically

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<sup>469</sup> Darina Křivánková, 'Komedie na ústupu', *Lidové noviny*, 29 April 2008, p. 20.

<sup>470</sup> Mirka Spáčilová, 'Návraty do války i do pravěku', *Mladá Fronta Dnes*, 6 June 2009, p. 23.

<sup>471</sup> Michal Procházka, 'V poutech české minulosti', *Divadelní noviny*, 9 March 2010, p. 11.

<sup>472</sup> Dominika Prejdová, 'Pocit, že za oknem prší kamení', *Lidové noviny*, 4 February 2020, p. 8.

<sup>473</sup> Šimon Šafránek, 'Poutavý svět fízla Antonína', *Instinkt*, 4 February 2010, pp. 34-35 (p. 34) and Irena Hejdová, 'Estébáci v nás', *Týden*, 1 February 2010, p. 62.



welcomed mainly because Czech critics had been 'evidently undernourished by innutritious recent Czech productions and the unhidden need for real film art'.<sup>474</sup> This statement implies that, Czech cinema, since it is lacking art, is saturated with lower forms. It is my aim in this chapter to further explore this notion of 'art' that this critic refers to, and the way these lower forms are constructed.

I argued in the previous chapter that the reception of *Identity Card* demonstrated the critics' increasingly explicit disdain for the 'comforting' pleasures associated with popular entertainment, especially television. In this chapter, I continue to argue that notions of value employed by critics in their evaluations of films set in the past are negotiated against ideas of broad audience appeal. I pay further attention to discourses around the value of genres, but also the film canons held by critics which shape their ideas of value. To some extent this chapter draws on Klinger's analysis of the reception of Sirk's melodramas in which she argues that at the time of their release Sirk's films were evaluated against the 'realist canon' influenced by 'U.S. war documentaries, Italian neo-realism, and developments in the theatre'.<sup>475</sup> Critical evaluations commonly seek examples that demonstrate some important qualities the film under evaluation either lacks or possesses. What I refer to as canon here is therefore a broad cluster of films that display (individually and collectively in a semblance of patterns) some of the sought-after qualities. The specific examples that form this canon in the flow of talk around *Walking Too Fast* are numerous, ranging from festival art films, genre film, and what can be called cult films. This cluster of veneered films indicates a preference for a level of 'extremity' that critics often contrast with the restraint of Czech cinema. As I will argue, this preference for extremity manifests itself not only in ideas about 'higher' pleasures expected from films but also in notions of genre purity.

The art film and the genre film, while both figuring in the canons critics find that Czech cinema should follow, are usually seen as opposing categories. Indeed, even in the flow of talk around *Walking Too Fast*, genre film is often perceived as belonging to the sphere of 'popular' cinema, as opposed to art cinema. More important for the purpose of this chapter is however the fact that both art film and genre film are associated in the discourse around *Walking Too Fast* as alternatives to *mainstream* Czech film. Throughout this chapter I will therefore be drawing mainly on Geoff King's approach to studying art cinema. King conceptualises art cinema as an 'entirely relational concept, one that makes claims to certain

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<sup>474</sup> Petr Fischer, 'Životy v Poutech touhy', *Lidové noviny*, 20 February 2010, p. 29.

<sup>475</sup> Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning*, p. 72.

kinds of cultural value and status that can only be understood in terms of various degrees of differentiation from more commercially oriented others'.<sup>476</sup> In his book King analyses 'markers' of difference that are mobilised in promotion, the text itself, and reception in order to differentiate a film from the commercial mainstream. While such markers aim to establish the superiority of some forms of cinema over others, they often 'draw on a very particular heritage of often unstated assumptions'.<sup>477</sup> Declarations of value might for example include claims that particular textual elements are better at capturing the nebulous 'essence' of cinema.<sup>478</sup> They also commonly rely on the familiar opposition of art vs. commerce in which one is higher because of its supposed seriousness and being driven by artist's creative urges, as opposed to the trivial, escapist, profit-driven mainstream. As King points out, the value of art cinema 'is at least to some extent predicated on limited access and often invidious comparison with other types of film or cultural production'.<sup>479</sup> Indeed, ideas of cinema targeting a broad audience is a prominent negative other in the materials analysed in this chapter. Czech mainstream film is repeatedly defined as overly kind and falling between several genres in its goal to attract broad audiences. The alternative to this is a riskier, bold cinema that is not afraid of exposing audiences to unpleasant realities. As I will demonstrate, claims to such an alternative status filled the ancillary materials of *Walking Too Fast*. I argue that the value of *Walking Too Fast* is repeatedly, implicitly and occasionally explicitly, tied to notions of exclusivity and to what could be called limited audience appeal. However, instead of approaching *Walking Too Fast* as inherently less commercial than other forms it seeks to be differentiated from, it is my aim to analyse it as a response to a gap in the market, a response to the demand of particular taste formations that define themselves against different ideas of mainstream. As Austin points out, 'The film business, like other industries, has a stake in exploiting difference, insofar as its products can be successfully targeted at distinct niche markets'.<sup>480</sup>

Before I look at the discourses circulating in the ancillary materials of *Walking Too Fast*, I will first highlight how the lower commercial others were described in the press towards the end of 2000s. In her analysis of reviews of Sirk's melodramas, Klinger notices that at the time of their release, Sirk's films were commonly positioned as part of the

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<sup>476</sup> King, *Positioning Art Cinema*, p. 3.

<sup>477</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>478</sup> Ibid., pp. 31-58.

<sup>479</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>480</sup> Austin, *Hollywood, Hype and Audiences*, p. 27.

Hollywood's typical "escapist" illusionist fare'.<sup>481</sup> They constituted the 'negative aesthetic benchmark ... a kind of zero-degree cinema, against which other films could be judged successful'.<sup>482</sup> The excess of these melodramas was in contrast to the ideas of realism held by critics. As I will show, there are several perceptions of lower forms of Czech cinema circulating around the time of *Walking Too Fast*'s release. As King argues, even the concept of art cinema is a graded spectrum of relative positions rather than a matter of simple binary oppositions.<sup>483</sup> Similarly, Jancovich notes that different 'supposedly radical and alternative taste cultures' construct different forms of mainstream against which they define themselves.<sup>484</sup> I analyse briefly discourses around the 'plebeian' comedy which is positioned in some accounts as the zero degree of Czech cinema. However, I will also return to analyse further discourses about the quality end of Czech cinema. This form of cinema is commonly described as combining several genres and relying on comforting pleasures. As I will argue, it is this form of middlebrow cinema that is more commonly positioned as the commercial other in critics' notions of value. Through its restraint, generic hybridity and depiction of serious topics in an accessible way, this type of cinema is argued to be appreciated by broad audiences and not allowing 'alternative' forms to thrive. As I will show, the alternative that is placed higher in hierarchies of value is defined especially in relation to the excess and seriousness and perceived generic purity of foreign films.

In the second section I will move onto analysing several consumable identities that were constructed in the promotional campaign of *Walking Too Fast*. I will demonstrate that these identities seek to mark the film's difference from various notions of Czech mainstream. Ancillary materials present *Walking Too Fast* as a genre film and focus especially on the label of thriller. At the same time, there are several other consumable identities proposed and some readings discouraged. The film is for example compared to the mafia film and is presented as a film without political motivations. I look at the hierarchisation of the film's consumable identities and tensions arising between them. I argue that such tensions are the result of the campaign's aim to react to the different discourses of value while at the same time maintaining a relatively broad audience appeal.

I will then move on to the film's critical reception. In the third section I will show that film critics describe and evaluate *Walking Too Fast* in opposition to ideas of Czech

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<sup>481</sup> Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning*, p. 73.

<sup>482</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>483</sup> King, *Positioning Art Cinema*, pp. 1-30.

<sup>484</sup> Jancovich, 'Cult Fictions', p. 306.

mainstream. I focus especially on the descriptive terms that aim to highlight the film's dark tone as an opposition to the comforting pleasures of usual Czech cinema. I will also demonstrate that valuations of the film often rely on references to foreign films with coveted attributes. *Walking Too Fast* is in numerous reviews compared to the Romanian film *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (*4 luni, 3 săptămâni și 2 zile*; Cristian Mungiu, 2007), which is used as a positive example that successfully depicted the communist past through the admired levels of extremity. However, references to other films that have gained prestige through the festival circuits and film clubs appear in reviews. On the other side of the scale is the German Oscar-winner *The Lives of Others* which is referenced as a film too close to notions of mainstream. As has been the case throughout this thesis, it is not my aim to invalidate critics' interpretations. Instead it is to bring attention to and complicate some of the unquestioned assumptions such valorisations and references are often based on.

### Lowbrow, Middlebrow and Negative Benchmarks

As the above-quoted articles noticing shifts in the thematic interests of Czech filmmakers indicate, comedy can be commonly found in the post-1989 output of Czech cinema. According to one writer, humour is even the 'engine' driving Czech cinema.<sup>485</sup> Indeed, not only have many Czech films made claims to the label of comedy at least to some extent, but films with such a label constantly prove to attract audiences to cinemas. Every year between 2002-2010 two to four Czech films that *Czecho-Slovak Film Database* classifies as comedies (occasionally along with other generic labels) climbed to the top ten of box office hits. Many of these comedies, however, were not embraced by critics. One film historian describes the emergence of these comedies in the 1990s as follows:

In an attempt to make do without state donations, a whole series of commercial "comedies" with the aim to entertain an ordinary spectator have sprouted. These films are often primitively pandering and vulgar, and critics often damn them as inanimate and shallow communal satires, living in their own, paper, virtual worlds.<sup>486</sup>

As can be observed, these are the films that operate on the most commercial end of the film industry; they want to appeal to the broadest audiences possible and have very little artistic ambition. By relying on low humour, offering shallow, unrealistic entertainment for

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<sup>485</sup> Křivánková, 'Komédie na ústupu'.

<sup>486</sup> Čulík, *Jací sme*, p. 216.

undemanding audiences, and not following a three-act narrative structure, these films are occasionally seen to have very few 'cinematic' qualities at all; if anything they are merely 'a symptom of how film aesthetics comes closer to television productions', according to one critic.<sup>487</sup>

The director Zdeněk Troška has especially become infamous for his ability to attract audiences while avoiding any notions of quality championed by critics. Films from his *Kameňák* trilogy (2003-5) have become epitomes of the 'plebeian comedy'. All became top ten box office hits in 2003-5 (sixth, eight and tenth respectively) while being panned by critics. To some extent, Troška's work has become the 'negative benchmark' of Czech cinema. His surname has even been turned into an adjective form to create the designation 'troškovský humor' (Troška-like or Troškian humour), a derogative term that connotes cheap and unsophisticated entertainment. To rely on Troškian humour in a film is to resort to the lowest form of humour.

The status of many post-1989 comedies in hierarchies of value can also be gauged from Peter Hames's book on Czech and Slovak cinemas. In his chapter on comedy Hames pays very little attention to comedies made after the Velvet Revolution (apart from mentioning Svěrák's films and a few other examples). He justifies this exclusion by writing that while 'comedy in the conventional sense is omnipresent in post-1989 Czech cinema, in this more "commercial" form, is no different from films produced elsewhere'.<sup>488</sup> There are many things to be said about the amount of discourse at work in this one sentence alone. However, the most relevant point to me currently concerns the assumption behind Hames's politics of selection and exclusion. The assumption here is that the films are justified to be excluded because they do not demonstrate sufficient levels of Czech flavour. The process of selection is hardly unusual in writing and Hames's statement is in line with his overall intentions throughout the book (after all, the book does bear the subtitle *Theme and Tradition*). In fact, some of the ideas of Czechness Hames constructs are not dissimilar from those we saw circulating around Czech films throughout this thesis – 'recognisable characters, links to daily life, and social commentary', but also 'traditional Czech ingredients of slapstick and irony', 'mixture of laughter and tears' that he traces to Czechoslovak New Wave and comedy authors Werich, Hrabal, and Voskovec.<sup>489</sup> However, it is possible to speculate that it is not so much the comedies' lack of 'Czechness' that was behind their

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<sup>487</sup> Fila, 'Zdejší filmaři'.

<sup>488</sup> Hames, *Czech and Slovak Cinema*, p. 51.

<sup>489</sup> Ibid., pp. 51-52.

exclusion, but instead their low status as commercial entertainment. Contrary to Hames, for example, Jan Čulík finds these comedies to be very Czech indeed. These comedies, he writes 'doubtless contain many motives that ordinary spectator considered authentic. It is possible that they testify to habits of Czech society from the beginning of the nineties more than many other sources'.<sup>490</sup> According to Čulík, these films have a lot to say about Czechness. It appears, therefore, that the shape of Czechness Hames strives to present is at least to some extent motivated by the audience the book addresses; it bears the rare status of a monograph on Czech cinema written in English language. The critically detested comedies produced after 1989 simply do not fit the image of Czech cinema to be presented to English-speaking academic audiences. In fact, in another publication, Hames affirms this assumption more clearly, expressing that 'The majority of successful films made since privatisation have not been of the highest quality – unsophisticated comedies, films aimed at the youth market, exploitation films'.<sup>491</sup> Similarly, while Čulík finds these films somewhat relevant objects of study, he still makes much effort to distance himself from the 'ordinary spectator' who finds pleasures in these films, for instance by placing quotation marks around the word 'comedies', to indicate that he does not find these films worthy of the label.

A form of commercial Czech comedy therefore figures as a zero degree of Czech cinema in some accounts. However, this low comedy is often seen as less dangerous than films that evade such clear denouncement. This position is well presented in one review of *Walking Too Fast*. I will analyse the discourses prevalent in reviews of the film in more detail later. However, one review is quite interesting to look at now because the critic opens it by presenting his position towards the contemporary output of Czech cinema:

Of late I don't mind those Czech films that demonstrate low humour, the most direct message possible, that borrow from anywhere without hesitation or even perhaps unknowingly. I don't even mind that they do so with the goal to briefly and easily entertain.... They are mostly fair: they offer exactly what they let to be known about them in advance, or something less at most. Contemporary 'smart-arse' Czech film production is much more irritating.<sup>492</sup>

This critic employs several terms to position comedy as low – easy, simple, direct, borrowing and therefore implied to be unoriginal, with short-term use. In the end, however this is less irksome than what he calls 'cultured Czech cinema'. Such cinema, he

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<sup>490</sup> Čulík, *Jací sme*, p. 216.

<sup>491</sup> Hames, 'Czech Cinema: From State Industry to Competition', p. 74.

<sup>492</sup> Jakub Felcman, 'Pouta: Vypovídat upřímně a na úrovni', *Cinepur*, 68 (2010), pp. 42-45 (p. 42).

writes, consists of 'serious often so called multi-layered, psychological or socio-political subject matter from Czech present or its past, ... technological spectacle ... and an array of first-class actors'.<sup>493</sup> While references to these aspects could indeed be (and as I argued in previous chapters, used to be) employed as markers of quality and higher value, the deficiencies of these films seem to undermine the ambitions to high status. This critic thinks that despite their claims to relevance, they tend to remain simple at their core: 'A distinctive feature of the most successful of these works is their creative simplicity lying in the emphasis on telling a dramatically standardly built story under the supervision of a chosen (although fittingly singular) *syuzhet* form'.<sup>494</sup> Under their claims to seriousness, they remain 'essentially all the same and interchangeable'.<sup>495</sup> While in the case of the zero-degree low comedy simplicity and easy entertainment is not so much an issue because it is 'fair', it is not acceptable in a form that has ambitions to higher relevance.

It is therefore the 'middleness' of 'cultured cinema', not neatly fitting in categories of either high or low that this critic seems to struggle to accept. As Jancovich points out, the 'middlebrow threatens the authority of the cultured elite more directly than the popular, which is therefore easier to patronise, in both sense[s] of the term .... popular taste knows its place, whereas the middlebrow does not'.<sup>496</sup> Indeed, the threat that the middlebrow cinema seems to pose to the authority of the elite is palpable in Felcman's writing. One of the problems that Felcman cites is that this form of cinema has achieved a domination through its adherence to certain notions of quality. 'A film work "well-bred" in this way – characterised by the fact that it doesn't offend anyone whether it's a gentleman from a bank or an exemplarily rebelling student from an arts college – therefore finds its needed interpreter, explainer and promoter in the critic'.<sup>497</sup> If we leave aside questions such as whether a gentleman from a bank and a student from an arts college are a broad enough sample of society to constitute 'anyone', the implication of Felcman's statement seems to be that it is such a film's broad appeal that is the reason behind its lesser worth. The critic's authority is presumed to be compromised by an appreciation of something with such a broad appeal without the possibility of easy denouncement as 'mere' low / disposable / simple entertainment. It appears that if a film wanted to offend 'someone', it would be more comfortable for the critic to favour it.

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<sup>493</sup> Ibid.

<sup>494</sup> Ibid.

<sup>495</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>496</sup> Jancovich, 'Naked Ambitions', p. 6.

<sup>497</sup> Felcman, 'Pouta', p. 43.

Another critic Kamil Fila finds very similar problems with Czech film criticism: 'The misery of local film criticism ... rests in its constant courting of the mainstream. It [the mainstream] does not constitute a preference for the most stupid plebeianism, but rather the idea of something "decent, tasteful, intelligent, but not too much". Mainstream here is the celebration of kitschy humanism and nostalgia'.<sup>498</sup> In this account, criticism seems to be in crisis because it upholds values that are too broadly enjoyed, to the point that they have become the mainstream, while lower forms of cinema are much easier to condemn as stupid. Fila's article was written as a response to the results of the inaugural Czech Critics' Film Awards. Fila, having several reservations about the results, urges critics to see the awards as a chance to highlight marginalised works: 'Criticism is therefore the defence and solidarity with the smaller ones'.<sup>499</sup> The marginalised can have a very broad shape and form under different circumstances, according to him; it does not necessarily indicate a preference for films for limited audiences. In fact, Fila attempts to give the impression that hierarchies of cultural value should not limit the focus of critics. He presents critics as omnivores who should know all streams of production, because, as he points out, 'Innovation can happen in all spheres of culture' and 'even a commercially successful film can be in some categories the weaker one (undervalued)'.<sup>500</sup> However, despite this effort to evade the impression of elitism and present an inclusive approach to granting awards, he somewhat contradicts his claims. He insists on holding a strongly negative stance towards the taste formation he finds to be dominant. As he says, 'art always develops in a different direction than what is currently considered "cultured"', this time therefore indicating that there is in fact little innovation to be found in this sphere of 'decent, tasteful' cinema.<sup>501</sup>

### Taste for Genre Filmmaking

The negative benchmark in several evaluations of Czech cinema is therefore presented as falling between the low and highbrow, having a restrained tendency, but at the same time appealing to a broad audience. Similar construction of the negative benchmark as cinema not committing to a clear category also appears in the way critics describe Czech filmmakers'

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<sup>498</sup> Kamil Fila, 'Ceny české filmové kritiky zatím nenabízejí alternativu', *Aktuálně.cz*, 15 January 2011, available at: <<https://magazin.aktualne.cz/kultura/film/ceny-ceske-filmove-kritiky-zatim-nenabizeji-alternativu/r~i:article:688145/>> [accessed 27 June 2020].

<sup>499</sup> Ibid.

<sup>500</sup> Ibid.

<sup>501</sup> Ibid.



use of genres. Another pattern observable in materials written in 2000s sees Czech national cinema as rather devoid of genres. The circulating idea is that Czech filmmakers do not know how or are not willing to make 'genre films'. One writer comments on the situation of Czech genre film and television as follows: 'Is it really that serious? When it comes to genre production, definitely yes. Authors have gotten used to telling tragicomic bitter-sweet stories where we find something from everything and there is rarely the will and taste to make more clean-cut works'.<sup>502</sup> Of course, genre mixing is not an unusual phenomenon in film industries. Staiger, for instance, argues that Hollywood films have always relied on genre mixing to appeal to a broad variety of audiences.<sup>503</sup> This is in fact the issue that many critics seem to have with Czech genre mixing; similar to Felcman's criticism of the cultured film that does not offend anyone, genre mixing comes across in many articles merely as an unwillingness to commit to a clear category and a populist attempt to please broad audiences.

An interesting phenomenon about the 'pretty Czech' tragicomedy is that it has not quite been able to complete its 'generification' process. As Rick Altman has argued, genres audiences nowadays accept as common had to undergo a gradual process of formation. He demonstrates that the musical and western were in fact initially used merely as adjectives, add-ons to other accepted generic categories before being turned into nouns themselves.<sup>504</sup> While Czech critics clearly recognise a cycle of sad / bitter / tragic comedies, these are often perceived as a mix of other 'purer' forms rather than a category of its own. Alena Prokopová for instance finds *Identity Card* to belong to the 'favourite genre of tragicomedy' which she also associates with the "'pretty, Czech" film worlds that in the domestic environment [are] represent[ed] especially by works of Jan Hřebejk'.<sup>505</sup> However, this 'genre' is placed low in hierarchies of value very quickly for its lack of purity. As she continues, this cycle is defined by the 'the non-committal tone of "neither fish nor fowl"'.<sup>506</sup> As a result, she argues that instead of leading discussions about the film's historical authenticity, 'a more interesting and sensible would be a discussion on the topic of purposeful storytelling about an evil period,

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<sup>502</sup> Martin Svoboda, 'Vyřeší Polívka s Vetchým krizi české detektivky?' *Aktuálně.cz*, 19 December 2013, available at <<https://magazin.aktualne.cz/televize/vyresi-polivka-s-vetchym-krizi-ceske-detektivky/r~58c8dd3e687a11e38b9e002590604f2e/>> [accessed 15 February 2020].

<sup>503</sup> Staiger, *Perverse Spectators*, p. 67.

<sup>504</sup> Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1999).

<sup>505</sup> Alena Prokopová, 'Občanský průkaz', *Alenčin blog*, 5 October 2010, available at: <<http://alenaprokopova.blogspot.com/2010/10/obcansky-prukaz.html>> [accessed 15 February 2020].

<sup>506</sup> Ibid.

that had more courage to be more crystallised professionally and in genre – either as a comedy or tragedy’.<sup>507</sup> It is a hybrid, not a real genre, it seems.<sup>508</sup>

Making a genre film therefore accrues specific connotations in Czech context. As Moine points out, ‘the production of a genre film ... minimizes risk-taking and allows the company to ride the wave of a perceived ground-swell’.<sup>509</sup> As a result, genres have sometimes been seen as manipulative products of mass culture and dominant ideologies.<sup>510</sup> In contrast to this, in Czech context, doing ‘genre’ well is on the one hand presented as a demonstration of filmmaker’s superior skills – following genre conventions requires a level of literacy (the right ‘taste’ as the writer above calls it) and getting the elements, tone and pace correctly. Furthermore, Czech writers do not deny that different audiences prefer different genres – to do genre is presented as a willingness to take risks by appealing only to a specialised segment of the audience, while potentially alienating others. As Moine says, ‘A single genre, by allowing the film to be pigeon-holed, can potentially restrict its potential audience’.<sup>511</sup> According to the critic above, *Identity Card* took the safe bet and decided for a familiar genreless approach that aims to appeal to a broad audiences, instead of trying something more ‘crystallised’ and therefore ‘courageous’.

To a large extent, however, the demand for purer genre filmmaking can also be interpreted as an expression of dissatisfaction with the perceived monotony and standardisation of Czech cinema. If on the one hand Hames argues that Czech post-communist cinema ‘is a cinema that has maintained its variety and originality against the odds’,<sup>512</sup> the texts analysed above conversely present it as rather formulaic. For instance, Felcman and Fila find Czech cinema to be dominated by ‘cultured’ or ‘decent’ cinema. As I mentioned above, one of the criticisms Felcman raises against the cultured films is that they ‘remain essentially all the same and interchangeable’.<sup>513</sup> Prokopová is also indicating in her review of *Identity Card* that a large amount of films have previously relied on the same

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<sup>507</sup> Ibid.

<sup>508</sup> Very similar denial of the status of genre to an established pattern can be seen in another review of *Identity Card*. One critic writes that, ‘Stories from “period” life are meant to be smiley, absurd and serious, even chilling at the same time. Why not, mix of genres is not a bad thing, on the contrary, it can be the root of the picture’s exceptionality’ (Aleš Smutný, ‘Občanský průkaz’, *Cinema*, November 2010, pp. 24-25 (p. 24)). Again, *Identity Card* is clearly seen as following in the footsteps of previous films, but this pattern is still seen merely as a ‘mix of genres’.

<sup>509</sup> Raphaëlle Moine, *Cinema Genre*, transl. by Alistair Fox and Hilary Radner (Malden; Oxford; Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), p. 67.

<sup>510</sup> Ibid., pp. 71-79.

<sup>511</sup> Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>512</sup> Hames, ‘The Czech and Slovak Republics: Velvet Revolution and After’, p. 60.

<sup>513</sup> Felcman, ‘Pouta’, p. 43.

patterns and structures. Her criticism of the tragicomic approach suggests that it is a formula that has been tried and tested a few too many times, without sufficient levels of innovation.<sup>514</sup> 'Pure' tragedy and comedy seem courageous also because they are seemingly untested in the conditions of Czech film industry.

### Art from Outside

As can be glimpsed from the excerpts analysed above, there are relatively few positives critics have to say about contemporary Czech cinema. Indeed, Czech cinema is often seen to be falling behind world cinema in terms of quality. This interpretation is indicated in another article by Kamil Fila in which he criticises, among other things, what he calls 'young' film critics. This new generation of critics and cinephiles, according to him, shows little interest in domestic film production because the greatest works are there at their fingertips, either on the internet, or at film festivals. As he says, this young critic 'doesn't go to cinema to see *Kameňáks*, nor do films from the stable Hřebejk – Jarchovský – Trojan (*Cosy Dens*, *Divided We Fall*, *Pupendo*, *Želary*, *Loop the Loop*) belong to their favourite titles'.<sup>515</sup> This young audience, according to him

focuses on more inspirational film areas than Czech pictures, is simply cosmopolitan, doesn't intend to fix the unfixable and wants to enjoy good films from elsewhere. The only message that young criticism (trained by the internet and / or university) has for local filmmakers is: read foreign literature and watch what is filmed in the whole of Asia, Mexico, France, Hungary.<sup>516</sup>

Indeed, the producer of *Walking Too Fast* clearly found young and educated audiences an important segment to target. The production company Bionaut defines itself in the press kit to the film as 'making films for young and demanding audiences'.<sup>517</sup> Before the film's release the director even postulates in one interview that the increase of more 'serious' films about the national past can also be attributed to the 'the arrival of a generation that is not haunted by the past' and is willing to look at it more critically.<sup>518</sup>

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<sup>514</sup> Although, as I argued in the previous chapter, positive reviews of *Identity Card* were able to identify the needed innovation in the topical emphasis on the film's 'chilling' scenes that were meant to signal a move away from previous films' nostalgic tendencies.

<sup>515</sup> Fila, 'Zdejší filmaři'.

<sup>516</sup> Ibid.

<sup>517</sup> Bionaut, *Pouta Presskit*, available at: <[http://bionaut.cz/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/presskit\\_pouta\\_ke-stazeni.pdf](http://bionaut.cz/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/presskit_pouta_ke-stazeni.pdf)> [accessed 15 February 2020], p. 22.

<sup>518</sup> Mirka Spáčilová, 'Český film: Invaze do minulosti', *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 6 June 2009, p. 21.

While I do believe the tastes of the new generation of university-trained critics and audiences influenced the occurring shifts in critical discourses, I do not wish to overstress this point. As I showed in the previous chapter, a relatively broad spectrum of critics reviewing *Identity Card* adopted very similar topical references. Even critics who were at one point positively inclined towards the pretty Czech style can be seen adapting their criteria in line with these shifts. In fact, Fila is criticising this young generation for not ‘communicating’ with Czech filmmakers properly, not ‘leading a mutually enriching dialogue’ with filmmakers, rather than claiming that their perceptions of quality and value are invalid.<sup>519</sup> The difference between generations is presented more as a matter of different priorities rather than tastes. What is instead of importance for my argument is the idea that quality seems to be happening ‘elsewhere’ than in Czech cinema.

It is also not the case that ‘elsewhere’ has any stable and clear definitions and boundaries. It can be virtually ‘anywhere’ outside of Czech borders.<sup>520</sup> In another article on the topic of contemporary Czech cinema published in the daily newspaper *Mladá fronta Dnes*, or rather its supplement *Kavárna* that bears the subtitle ‘Supplement for thinking, culture and civilisation’, scriptwriter and producer Jan Štern expresses his belief that ‘Czech film is too kind’.<sup>521</sup> As he says, films of the creative duo Jan Hřebejk and Petr Jarchovský, which according to him

best represent the Czech fiction film of about last ten years, construct a world in which their protagonists create escape routes from the raw world. These spaces are those “cosy dens” where they behave nicely and kindly towards each other and where everyone – goodies and baddies – are essentially good because they are ours, they are one of us.... Jan Hřebejk kindly avoids the cruel ends towards which leads not only the logic of real life but also of many film stories.<sup>522</sup>

What is interesting about Štern’s article, is that he describes Czech cinema, and eventually passes judgements over it, in relation to ideas of ‘outside’ which he finds to be concerned with different thematic concerns. These thematic concerns, he finds, started emerging in

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<sup>519</sup> Fila, ‘Zdejší filmaři’.

<sup>520</sup> Occasionally it also indicates temporal others – the perception of Czech New Wave as unsurpassed quality in Czech cinema remains. However, in this chapter, my focus remains more on ‘spatial’ definitions.

<sup>521</sup> Jan Štern, ‘Český film je příliš laskavý’, *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 5 March 2005, supplement *Kavárna* - Příloha pro myšlení, umění a civilizaci, pp. EI-EII.

<sup>522</sup> Ibid.

‘American film at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century’ by filmmakers such as ‘Lynch, the Coen brothers, Jarmusch or Tarantino’.<sup>523</sup> These directors analyse ‘the contemporary semblance of evil’.<sup>524</sup> This theme, Štern presents, quickly travelled and ‘found its followers in the world. In their specific conditions (from Mexican *Amores perros*, to, for example, works of Japanese director Takeshi Kitano), they developed similar motives and poetics. It is remarkable that nothing from this transpired in Czech cinema of the nineties’.<sup>525</sup> Instead, Czech cinema seems to be concerned with different topics and this difference is at the core of Czech cinema’s inferiority. Štern continues that ‘If the thematic foci of an inquiring and intellectually ambitious European film moves towards the question why to live, the concern over here seems to be how to live. They are fundamentally different queries. This difference quite captures the abyss between the world and the Czech film’.<sup>526</sup> The value of the trends Štern identifies undergoes very little scrutiny in the article; it is presented as rather self-evident. Evil is somewhat connected to realism as the recourse towards which ‘the logic of life’ seemingly inevitably leads. As King points out, films that aim to mark their difference from the mainstream often emphasise their focus on ‘harsher’ realities of life.<sup>527</sup> Whether the ‘logic of life’ necessarily leads to cruelty is a matter of opinion, but such a construction serves as a useful contrast to the themes offered by Czech cinema, which can thus be dismissed as escapist. Czech cinema seems to be a lonely isolated island in a world that is following different artistic trends.

However, as can be seen, the ‘world’ with which Czech cinema cannot compete with is in Štern’s article a discursive construct just as Czech cinema is (which is here represented only by five films made by Hřebejk and Jarchovský). The outside that Czech cinema does not keep up with slips from the American indie sector, to Mexico, Japan, Europe (and France and Hungary, in Fila’s case) and eventually the world as a whole. Importantly, it is mainly the names of prominent directors who have built their reputation at international film festivals who represent the world trends. Fila similarly indicates that the ‘whole of Asia, Mexico, France, Hungary’, in fact refers mainly to those films that the young critics have a chance to see at film festivals and film schools rather than all films produced in these countries.

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<sup>523</sup> Ibid., p. EI.

<sup>524</sup> Ibid.

<sup>525</sup> Ibid.

<sup>526</sup> Ibid., p. EII.

<sup>527</sup> King, *Positioning Art Cinema*, p. 33.

So far, I have aimed to highlight some of the discourses informing notions of value in Czech criticism around the release of *Walking Too Fast*. There are several points that re-merge repeatedly – preference for different forms of extremity that are highlighted in opposition to Czech mainstream(s). This can be witnessed in Prokopová's genre definitions and her preference for more 'crystallised' forms, Fila's dislike of the 'decent' cinema that remains restrained in its intelligence and taste, as well as Štern's criticism of the kind Czech cinema. The alternative to this which is to be valued more is cinema willing to venture into more extremes in terms of tone, its explorations of themes, and is not afraid to potentially 'offend' or unnerve the audience. These are in fact the discourses that shaped the identities of *Walking Too Fast* introduced in promotion.

### Selling a Smart Genre Film

The protagonist of *Walking Too Fast* is Antonín Rusnák (Ondřej Malý) – an impulsive officer of the Czechoslovak secret police StB. For his superiors Antonín is in many ways an exemplary worker. His unpredictability and use of intimidation and violence in his interrogations inspire fear in his victims – dissidents and enemies of the state – and Antonín is therefore quite effective at his job. However, he does not care much for it, and increasingly pushes people away from him. When he finds out about the affair of dissident Tomáš (Martin Finger) with Klára (Kristína Farkašová), he becomes obsessed with her and directs most of his attention to separating the couple. After successfully disposing of Tomáš who emigrates with his family, Antonín manages to secure a meeting with Klára. She rejects him; she does not see them as the kindred spirits Antonín thought they were. The film ends with Antonín walking into a lake while emptying the contents of his pockets and disappearing under the surface.

That this was a film hoping to attract audiences looking for other pleasures than those usually offered by Czech cinema is well expressed in efforts to construct *Walking Too Fast* as an alternative to different forms of Czech mainstream. A visible sign of this was the film's explicit aim to distinguish itself from previous retro-films. In one interview the interviewer describes *Walking Too Fast* as 'a bit different than what the audience is used to from Czech retro-films', since it displays 'no kind humour'.<sup>528</sup> The interviewer asks whether this was an intentional decision. The scriptwriter admits that 'Of course, there was a sort of underlying motivation, to show it differently than in those kind films, which are today

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<sup>528</sup> Alena Plavcová, 'Výlet do totality', *Pátek Lidových novin*, 5 February 2010, pp. 6-13 (p. 8).

perhaps a bit out of fashion'.<sup>529</sup> The director is also quoted saying in numerous materials that he is 'interested in seeing how the film resonates with that part of the public that has long been demanding a film that is not spread-out genre-wise, nor a testimony, or let's say a film that doesn't play on the retro string, but at the same time has ambitions to relate to the past in a way other than conciliatory'.<sup>530</sup> In these statements *Walking Too Fast* is constructed purely as a series of oppositions to attributes associated with previous films of similar kind, namely their perceived genrelessness, kindness, and conciliatory approach to the representation of the past.

Similar claims to distinction can also be visible in the producer's statement published next to *Walking Too Fast*'s review in the magazine *Instinkt*. The producer joins the wave of criticism of mainstream Czech cinema and derides it for its low standards. This time taking the 'stupid' Czech cinema as the negative benchmark, he points out that these films 'underestimate spectators'.<sup>531</sup> According to him, filmmakers making these films tend to think that

*The spectator is a stupid hillbilly. He doesn't think and likes dumb things. If we really want him to understand us, we have to do things worse and more stupid. Rubbish! ... If we took our spectator seriously and thought about what interests him, perhaps it would transpire that he's more cunning and smarter than first meets the eye. Then we would perhaps stop being afraid and try to offer him something purposeful without the feeling of futility. We're trying to do it now with our film Walking Too Fast. (emphasis in original)*<sup>532</sup>

The producer here relies on a common opposition between low and higher forms, by associating the former with stupidity and the latter with intelligence and sophistication. Furthermore, he clearly indicates the aspirations of *Walking Too Fast* to be placed in this category of higher cinema. There is an appeal to a specific taste formation present in the statement – one that considers itself as discerning and looking for more 'depth' in films.<sup>533</sup>

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<sup>529</sup> Ondřej Štindl quoted in Ibid.

<sup>530</sup> Radim Špaček quoted in Bionaut, *Putá Presskit*, p. 5.

<sup>531</sup> Vratislav Šlajer, 'Klub rváčů', *Instinkt*, 4 February 2010, p. 35.

<sup>532</sup> Ibid.

<sup>533</sup> Indeed, many critics later similarly strived to ascribe the film the status of a 'sophisticated' film. This can be noticed, for example, in the generic terms they sometimes resorted to. They found that *Walking Too Fast* was, or had elements of, among other things, psychological thriller, existential drama, political melodrama, psychological drama. Adjectives such as psychological, existential, political are used to substantiate the film, indicating that the film deals with weighty, big, important topics rather than trivial concerns.

Importantly, the producer identifies this taste formation as one that has not been sufficiently addressed in the Czech market. This is also similar to the statements of the scriptwriter and director above who indicate that *Walking Too Fast* is responding to particular shifts: the outdatedness of kind retro-comedies and demands of some audiences for an alternative to the conciliatory genreless tone. In fact, Ondřej Štindl who wrote the script for *Walking Too Fast* is himself a film critic and was part of the group of commentators who were expressing their dislike of the comforting pleasures of *Kolya* after the film's release. *Walking Too Fast* is here therefore presented as a kind of film the demand for which has gone unnoticed.

I would now like to turn to other identities ancillary materials introduced in the promotional campaigns of *Walking Too Fast*, and the tensions that emerged between these different identities. As is usual in film promotion, *Walking Too Fast* aimed to maximise its audiences by highlighting several fragments to provide a variety of avenues of access for different audiences. In the process, several reading strategies for the film are introduced, others are more actively discouraged. As is usual, the attempt to provide many avenues of access to the film occasionally results in claims that do not always sit comfortably next to each other.

One strand of claims that was given a prominent space in the promotional campaign introduced *Walking Too Fast* as a thriller. Focus on this label was especially important since, after all, the film was meant to be differentiated from those films 'spread-out genre-wise'. The press kit summarises the film as a 'thriller about darkness, love, destruction, freedom, prison and escape'.<sup>534</sup> Other descriptions promise a 'thriller with a dark story and unpredictably acting protagonist', a film 'filled with the feeling of danger, captivating and tense'.<sup>535</sup> The protagonist of the film especially was meant to be the centre of the film's action and a source of many genre pleasures. In this film he 'follows his goal in a self-destructive way. He keeps all characters of the film, and with them also the audience, in constant tension'.<sup>536</sup> Apart from the label of 'thriller', there were also several other categories indicated in ancillary materials. Highlighting the police environment and the use of terms such as 'prison and escape', as well as the film's Czech title *Pouta* which can be translated as 'handcuffs' / 'ties' / 'bonds', signal the genre of crime drama, although this genre is never mentioned explicitly (probably to avoid comparisons with the infamous socialist TV series *30 případů majora Zemana* (ČST, 1974-1979)). The film is also explicitly

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<sup>534</sup> Bionaut, *Pouta Presskit*, p. 3.

<sup>535</sup> Ibid.

<sup>536</sup> Vratislav Šlajer quoted in Ibid.



compared to mafia films,<sup>537</sup> to which I shall return shortly. As I indicated above, Czech mainstream cinema was perceived in one family of arguments as devoid of genre filmmaking. The promotional campaign was therefore interested in preserving an air of genre purity around *Walking Too Fast*. On the one hand, the use of different generic denominations like mafia film and thriller, could, strictly speaking, be seen as at odds with the director's promise to deliver a film not diffused genre-wise. On the other hand, these terms are deemed close enough in terms of tone, and even treated as rather synonymous in ancillary materials, and therefore did not threaten the claim to genre purity significantly. The tone, in fact, seems to be especially important in notions of genre purity circulating around Czech cinema. Even in the review of *Identity Card* analysed above, the critic's demand for more 'crystallised' genre in films defines purity especially on the scale 'serious vs. humorous'. After all, the term 'tragedy' she uses as an example of a more crystallised genre is not commonly applied to cinema, at least not in the same sense as it is in relation to theatre. Instead, it is used in the review for its associations with heightened seriousness of theme and tone. Similarly, while relying on several generic labels, *Walking Too Fast* could still come across as a relatively 'pure' genre film through emphasis on aspects such as 'darkness', 'destruction', 'danger', 'tension' that these genres are often perceived to share.

As I argued above, part of the opposition to genre hybridity of Czech cinema was its association with comforting pleasures for broad audiences. The labels of thriller and mafia film were therefore importantly employed to support the film's 'disavowal of what are seen as the "seductive" popular pleasures'.<sup>538</sup> In fact, the expressive terms chosen to describe the film in ancillary materials indicate rather unpleasant 'pleasures'. *Walking Too Fast* is described as a 'stuffy, depressing story' in one article.<sup>539</sup> Another writer finds 'desire, jealousy, anger and self-destruction' to be the words that capture the film's essence.<sup>540</sup> In interviews the director repeatedly talks about his aim to capture the 'bleakness of the period'<sup>541</sup> through visual means, since apparently one key characteristic of the period was its 'colourlessness'.<sup>542</sup> Not only is the environment literally described as colourless, all characters also struggle to find colour in their lives. The protagonist Antonín, we find, feels 'immense untargeted anger and everything around him – work and family life – torments

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<sup>537</sup> Věra Míšková, 'Radim Špaček nasazuje Pouta', *Právo*, 28 January 2010, p.3.

<sup>538</sup> King, *Positioning Art Cinema*, p. 274.

<sup>539</sup> Míšková, 'Radim Špaček nasazuje Pouta'.

<sup>540</sup> Jana Podskalská, 'Pouta aneb Jak unikat životu', *Pražský deník*, 13 January 2010, p. 5.

<sup>541</sup> Bionaut, *Pouta Presskit*, p. 5.

<sup>542</sup> Radim Špaček in *Sama doma* (ČT1, 1998-) broadcast 5 February 2010.

and bores him'.<sup>543</sup> His obsession with Klára is 'pointless', driven by 'unarticulated and dark desire' or 'by a burning desire for an illusion of escape from the cage of boring pointless life'.<sup>544</sup> Antonín's rebellion is 'personal and furious'.<sup>545</sup> However, all characters are similarly 'tormented by the desire to escape from the traps of their own lives'.<sup>546</sup> Ancillary materials in fact predominantly focus on characters' negative personality traits rather than virtues. One interviewer describes the characters of the film as 'altogether exemplarily negative'.<sup>547</sup> The director admits that apart from Klára, whose name is meant to indicate her purity, 'we predefined others as personifications of personality flaws' with 'a trace of humanity'.<sup>548</sup> The press kit even describes what personality flaws were meant to be the basis for these characters – Antonín's is 'self-destructive furiousness, Pavel's cowardice, Tomáš's passivity'.<sup>549</sup> Together these characters live in a 'machinery of betrayal, manipulation, crooked rebellion and brutality that crushes all protagonists one way or the other'.<sup>550</sup> This was therefore not meant to be a sun-drenched experience but a rather dramatic blend of darkness, corruption, brutality.

Furthermore, such a blend of attributes provided a good opportunity to connect *Walking Too Fast* to the films exploring 'the shape of evil' that Štern highlighted as the prime trend in world cinema. Ancillary materials appealed to the taste formation preferring such films by comparing *Walking Too Fast* especially to American films. For example, the scriptwriter Ondřej Štindl says to have found inspiration for the script in *Casino* (Martin Scorsese, 1995). The idea for the film stemmed from his subsequent contemplation on 'what would a similar film be like if it were Czech'.<sup>551</sup> The parallels were to be found reportedly in the fact that the secret police at the time 'was a mafia of its own kind',<sup>552</sup> a form of 'organised crime against its citizens'.<sup>553</sup> The anti-heroic figure of Antonín was also an element employed to reaffirm connections to American films. When answering a question about whether the main character was inspired by a real person, the writer describes his inspirations as follows: 'Maybe some film characters like *Bad Lieutenant*, a film by Abel Ferrara, played by Harvey

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<sup>543</sup> Bionaut, *Pouta Presskit*, p. 3.

<sup>544</sup> Ibid.

<sup>545</sup> Ibid.

<sup>546</sup> Ibid.

<sup>547</sup> Míšková, 'Radim Špaček nasazuje Pouta'.

<sup>548</sup> Ibid.

<sup>549</sup> Bionaut, *Pouta Presskit*, p. 3.

<sup>550</sup> Ibid.

<sup>551</sup> Štindl quoted in Míšková, 'Radim Špaček nasazuje Pouta'.

<sup>552</sup> Mirka Spáčilová, 'Točí se zamilovaný estébák', *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 28 November 2008, p. 10.

<sup>553</sup> Míšková, 'Radim Špaček nasazuje Pouta'.

Keitel transpired in the figure. He's really cool. Or the classic figure of the obsessed, wild and a bit mysterious guy in *Taxi Driver*'.<sup>554</sup> Such references draw on the reputations and perceptions circulating about these films to indicate potential pleasures in *Walking Too Fast*. A kind of fannish admiration can be detected in the description of Keitel's character, strengthening the suggestion of inspiration and similarity of pleasures. The description of the 'obsessed, wild and a bit mysterious guy' from *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976) and comparing the state secret police to mafia organisations presents interpretative frameworks through which one can approach this new film too. Importantly, the emphasis is on the troubled and anti-heroic behaviours of these protagonists, on the exploration of evil present in these films.

The film's generic identities were therefore employed to maintain an emphasis on darkness in the film's tone, which could furthermore be connected to themes and pleasures purportedly missing in Czech cinema. While some attractions proposed in ancillary materials of *Walking Too Fast* were approached as more or less equally valuable for strengthening the film's positioning as a departure from the pleasing pleasures of mainstream cinema, others were more problematic. As Austin points out, ancillary materials also tend to indicate a 'hierarchization of textual elements and the audiences for which they bid'.<sup>555</sup> Such a hierarchisation is observable for example in the treatment of the occasional indications of the film's romantic undertones. The official synopsis, after all, described the film as a 'thriller about darkness, love, destruction' and other things. One article also presents the film as 'something between a retro-thriller and intimate romantic drama'.<sup>556</sup> Another article labels the film as one about a 'secret policeman in love'.<sup>557</sup> However, the designation 'thriller about darkness and love' implies that 'love' is only a secondary ingredient being added to the mix that is still meant to be primarily a thriller. Another description from the press kit contradicts the existence of a romantic storyline altogether in order to reinforce the film's identity as a dark story; here we find that there is in fact 'no love, nor any other type of pure passion [in Antonin's actions] – only a burning desire for an illusion of escape from the cage of boring,

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<sup>554</sup> Štindl quoted in Plavcová, 'Výlet do totality', p. 10.

<sup>555</sup> Austin, *Hollywood, Hype and Audiences*, p. 115.

<sup>556</sup> Mirka Spáčilová, 'Sezona začne slibně: filmem Pouta', *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 11 January 2010, p. 10.

<sup>557</sup> Spáčilová, 'Točí se zamilovaný estébák'. In this particular case the description was perhaps employed to draw parallels between *Walking Too Fast* and *The Lives of Others* to which the author compares the film (and differentiates it from).

pointless life'.<sup>558</sup> Some pleasures were therefore simply more prominently accentuated than others to strengthen the film's position as an alternative to mainstream cinema(s).

A similar process of hierarchisation can be observed in a set of claims that aimed to discourage one specific viewing strategy. That is, several texts stressed that *Walking Too Fast* was not meant to offer a political commentary on the communist past. In a step that is certainly not unusual for films set in the past, the aim of the filmmakers was 'to tell a story with a more universal theme than a mere testimony about the period it's set in'.<sup>559</sup> *Walking Too Fast* is therefore 'certainly not a political story. Politics only intensifies the dilemmas that heroes have to deal with, dilemmas that are not tied to the period and setting by far'.<sup>560</sup> As Moine points out, to be able to employ genres in discourses of higher cultural value, critics and filmmakers commonly establish how specific films transcend genres, pay homage to them or use them with a 'clearly signaled secondary intention, or in an individual style'.<sup>561</sup> In the promotion of *Walking Too Fast* we see an opposite process; genre 'transcendence' in the form of claims to social relevance are minimised. In the case of *Walking Too Fast*, the lack of political motivations is often employed to reinforce the film's identity as primarily a genre film. This can be seen in the way ancillary materials, after discouraging political interpretations, instead shift attention to the film's dark tone. In one interview the director repeats the argument that 'The story is set in year 1982 but it's not a historical film, the period plays a role rather secondary'.<sup>562</sup> He subsequently adds that 'the dark visual of the period' simply 'fits the story'.<sup>563</sup>

Similarly, Antonín, being a 'bored' and frustrated secret policeman, could on the one hand be seen as undermining the communist system from within (as several critics later pointed out). However, materials published before the film's release aim to discourage this interpretation by clarifying that his rebellion against the regime is not political. In some articles, Antonín's behaviour is explained as a result of his mental instability; he is 'unstable, perhaps even a sick bully, full of unarticulated anger and desperation' and 'psychopathic tendencies'.<sup>564</sup> It is repeated that the regime did not create this character, but merely allowed him to thrive: 'His state [of mind] is not the result of the job he chose, quite the

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<sup>558</sup> Bionaut, *Pouta Presskit*, p. 3.

<sup>559</sup> Štindl quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>560</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>561</sup> Moine, *Cinema Genre*, p. 73. See also King, *Positioning Art Cinema*, pp. 212-254.

<sup>562</sup> Radim Špaček quoted in Plavcová, 'Výlet do totality', p. 9.

<sup>563</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>564</sup> Bionaut, *Pouta Presskit*, p. 12.

opposite. He chose the job he does because of what he's like'.<sup>565</sup> We are therefore invited to approach Antonín as an irrational character driven by unexplained inner urges rather than a person with conscious logical goals. In short, Antonín is a character governed by genre rules rather than political motivations. Somewhere else the press kit admits that 'If Antonín breaks the rules of the organisation he serves, it is not a civic or even political gesture – it's a purely personal and furious revolt'.<sup>566</sup> In insisting that Antonín's actions are purely personal and furious, the producers seem to be assuring the audience that this is going to be purely a film relying on genre pleasures and not a political musing.

It is not hard to imagine that the decision to contain the political interpretation was economically motivated. While explicitly presenting the film as one with political intentions could also have served to establish the film's distinction from the mainstream, it appears that this was deemed by producers to be a step a bit too far, potentially alienating many audiences. As I will argue shortly, even the political interpretations were encouraged to some extent. However, producers chose to mitigate this reading, to instead reinforce the film's identity as a 'pure' genre film. In this way the film could aim to appeal to a broader audience while still maintaining its difference from Czech mainstream cinema through its emphasis on 'crystallised' dark tone.

The film's historical setting is an attraction that most clearly demonstrates the complex and contradictory tendencies arising from attempts to manage and address several discourses during the film's promotion. While on the one hand ancillary materials were explicitly downplaying the historical theme and the political connotations it brings, on the other hand, this was still meant to be a film about the past. As Higson showed in the example of *Elizabeth*, even films that strive to present a façade of 'irreverence' towards the historical topic in order to attract an audience that would not normally see a historical film, cannot disregard the discourses of historical authenticity completely so that audiences interested in such attractions are not alienated.<sup>567</sup> A clear indication of this is the fact that the film itself does not clearly state the year the film takes place in, supporting therefore the producers' aim to make a film with a more universal message. However, many ancillary materials repeatedly situate the film in the year 1982, marking thus its pastness. Furthermore, several ancillary materials point out that the writer consulted former secret police officers and a history expert from the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes in preparation for the

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<sup>565</sup> Ibid.

<sup>566</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>567</sup> Higson, *English Heritage, English Cinema*, p. 197.

film, demonstrating therefore a commitment to a level of historical accuracy.<sup>568</sup> The claim to the film's apoliticism is further complicated by the director who states on at least one occasion that while the film could also be set in contemporary times, he belongs to the generation of filmmakers that needs to come to terms with the national past.<sup>569</sup> In this example the motivations for making the film are rather political, stemming from dissatisfactory integration of the national past into the nation's cultural memory. In another interview the director wonders how the film will be received by audiences who were interrogated by the police during the regime.<sup>570</sup> These materials bring to the fore the depiction of the communist past as well as the political undertones of such historical representation.

The historical topic was therefore not an insignificant attraction. Apart from some emphasis on accurate evocation of the period's atmosphere, we can also find the cast and crew talking about their personal experiences and memories of growing up during the communist regime. One writer titles her interview with the filmmakers 'A trip to totalitarianism',<sup>571</sup> indicating that one pleasure of the viewing experience stems from 'travelling' to the past through the film. Indeed, as I discussed in the previous chapter, 'coming to terms with the past' was gaining more prominence as a topical reference in evaluative strategies of critics. In this context, these moments of reminiscence and travelling to the past are never called nostalgic, as such a label was far from desirable in the film's quality image.

It is in fact the friction between the two identities as an apolitical genre film on the one hand, and a film about the communist past on the other, that critics occasionally struggled to reconcile. The film's status as a genre film was commonly accepted in reviews, but this was less the case with the film's claims to apoliticism. Many critics repeatedly strive to interpret *Walking Too Fast* as a commentary on the communist past at the same time but find this element to be unsatisfactorily executed. One critic thinks that the 'two lines – behaviour of characters and depiction of the period, are not really tied in the plot, so the whole sometimes unfunctionally falls apart'.<sup>572</sup> Another critic expresses a similar opinion, thinking that 'the film stretches itself over perhaps in the end two opposing principles, the

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<sup>568</sup> For example in Spáčilová, 'Točí se zamilovaný estébák', Míšková, 'Radim Špaček nasazuje Pouta', Plavcová, 'Výlet do totality', pp. 10-11.

<sup>569</sup> Špaček quoted in Míšková, 'Radim Špaček nasazuje Pouta'.

<sup>570</sup> Plavcová, 'Výlet do totality', p. 13.

<sup>571</sup> Ibid.

<sup>572</sup> Věra Míšková, 'Pouta jsou studií psychopatické posedlosti', *Právo*, 4 February 2010, p. 17.

simplicity and clear rules of the genre and at the same time a more complex social portrait'.<sup>573</sup> These critics identify the film's aspirations to not be 'just' a genre film, but they also find that it remains a bit too generic at its core and therefore falls short on delivering a more substantial commentary. In the end, the aspirations to be classified as a genre film on the one hand and a commentary on the past on the other are perceived as opposing tendencies. In a similar way, one critic criticises *Walking Too Fast* for not being a pure enough genre film and sidestepping into the category of 'arty drama'.<sup>574</sup> In this way he also reminds the lack of and demand for genre filmmaking in Czech cinema.

As I have shown in this section, the promotional campaign of *Walking Too Fast* reacted to a variety of discourses that formed different ideas about Czech mainstream. I showed that there was a focus especially on creating a sense of genre purity. Ancillary materials create hierarchies in the variety of indicated pleasures, favouring those uncomfortable and dark, to create a contrast to the conciliatory pleasures associated with the mainstream. As is my ongoing argument in this chapter, this appeal to quality is inseparable from the film's commercial interests. The identities constructed in the ancillary materials rely on their perceived novelty and signal the film's aspirations to appeal to higher notions of value. However, they also show an interest in broadening the audience by making multiple promises about the film. *Walking Too Fast* was to be a Czech genre film, an unusually smart Czech film about the topical theme of the national past, but also not a political commentary and a more universal story. I now want to focus more attention on the critical reception of the film which continued to find a variety of interpretations for *Walking Too Fast* but still sought to do so in opposition to ideas about the mainstream.

### Following World Trends – Reviewing *Walking Too Fast*

As I have already indicated, critical reception of *Walking Too Fast* continued to reaffirm the topicality of 'coming to terms with the past', as it was the primary reference through which critics framed the film. One critic therefore finds *Walking Too Fast* to be a response to a 'Demand for a film that would come to terms with recent Czecho(Slovak) past better than Czech society'.<sup>575</sup> Demand, that according to her 'grew after the premier of German *The Lives*

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<sup>573</sup> Prejdová, 'Pocit, že za oknem přší kamení'.

<sup>574</sup> Jaroslav Sedláček, 'Pouta - nejlepší porevoluční český thriller, který jste nikdy neviděli', *Kinobox.cz*, republished 12 February 2019, available at <<https://www.kinobox.cz/clanek/3564-retro-recenze-pouta>> [accessed 20 February 2020].

<sup>575</sup> Hejdová, 'Estébáci v nás'.

of Others'.<sup>576</sup> Another critic expresses a similar opinion, thinking that together with the recent release of *Kawasaki Rose, Walking Too Fast*: 'can appear as a kind of peak of a wave of an interest in a (very delayed) reflection on the communist past'.<sup>577</sup> However, coming to terms with the past was not necessarily what critics found the film to be doing or even trying to do. Instead, in positive reviews the topical reference was merely one strategy through which critics aimed to highlight the film's exceptionality in the environment of Czech cinema. One review finds the film to be valuable because 'After Hřebejkian idylls like *Pupendo*, finally comes a reckoning with our own dark past'.<sup>578</sup> On the other hand, another critic thinks that 'no-one is trying to compulsorily "come to terms with the past" here, but [it] plays in a completely different league – the desire to make a work that cuts all ties with what you associate with the term "Czech film"'.<sup>579</sup> If anything, the reception of *Walking Too Fast* demonstrates the vague nature of what 'coming to terms with the past' actually means and entails – while on the one hand, this critic does not find the film to be trying to come to terms with the past, he still sees it as addressing the demand for a 'reflection' on the past, for example. Regardless of the definition individual critics employ, the reference is broadly used to mark the film's difference from previous Czech films, to highlight the fact that the film has indeed 'cut all ties' to the connotations of the term 'Czech film'.

As I have been arguing throughout this chapter, a process of distancing from the various associations with the term 'Czech film' was important for appealing to circulating ideas of value. Indeed, because of *Walking Too Fast*'s difference from anything that critics saw in contemporary Czech cinema, they drew on their cultural capital to find connections to foreign films. These 'similar' films quite often had the benefit of having been legitimised through different means, whether for their success at the film festival circuits or their reputations as classics or cult films. One critic for instance finds in *Walking Too Fast* traces of 'Faustus traditions of German expressionism'.<sup>580</sup> But there are also elements from other branches of European art cinema, 'comparable perhaps with the depression of Kieslowski's *Short Film About Killing* or the indeterminateness of Gaspar Noé's pictures', but also the films of 'Andrzej Zulawskii, and his traumatising testament about tortured souls like *The Third Part*

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<sup>576</sup> Ibid.

<sup>577</sup> Kamil Fila, 'Pouta mají zpřetrhané vazby na všechno', *Aktuálně.cz*, 5 February 2010, available at: <<https://magazin.aktualne.cz/kultura/film/recenze-pouta-maji-zpretrhane-vazby-na-vsechno/r~i:article:659832/>> [accessed 20 February 2020].

<sup>578</sup> Martin Jiroušek, 'Nejednoznačnost a herecké mistrovství nelehkých Pout', *Mladá fronta Dnes – severní Morava a Slezsko*, 28 December 2010, p. 5.

<sup>579</sup> Fila, 'Pouta mají zpřetrhané vazby na všechno'.

<sup>580</sup> Martin Jiroušek, 'Bezvýchodná deprese plodí šílenství', *Film a doba*, 56.1 (2010), 55-57, p. 57.



of *Night*, or especially *Devil*, historical allegory about Polish secret security of the seventies'.<sup>581</sup> Interestingly, while this critic draws comparisons between *Walking Too Fast* and films of Polish auteurs, the more recent cycle of Polish popular gangster films is not mentioned.<sup>582</sup> Instead, examples from art film traditions are selected. In a similar way, while a few critics found parallels between Antonín and the protagonist of a Czechoslovak New Wave film *The Cremator* (*Spalovač mrtvol*; Juraj Herz, 1968), others saw him as an altogether unseen phenomenon in Czech cinema. In one review he is 'a similarly intense character like the insatiable detective in Abel Ferrara's crime film *Bad Lieutenant*, from brutal line "Show me your ID you piece of shit" to psychopathic courting of Klára'.<sup>583</sup> Another critic offers very similar opinions on the place of Antonín in the family tree of film antiheroes:

It's hard to find an equivalent to the main character with such monumentally negative (and at the same time somehow alluring) personality in Czech cinema. We would be more likely to find his relatives in films emerging in the USA from the 1930s like *Public Enemy* of William Wellman or *Shadow of a Doubt* of Alfred Hitchcock, or perhaps (with a female antagonist) *The Little Foxes* of William Wyler. But also in German *M* of Fritz Lang. And of course, in much later cult American pictures such as *Goodfellas* of Martin Scorsese.<sup>584</sup>

To add one more title to the list of comparisons, another critic thinks that 'Rusnák evokes some figures in Park's *The Vengeance Trilogy*, especially *Oldboy*'.<sup>585</sup> It is safe to assume that such references in reviews serve several purposes. They seem to be used as part of the review's function as a 'prefigurative text' – preparing the reader for the potential act of watching and highlighting what is noteworthy about the film, or accompanying retrospective reflection on it.<sup>586</sup> At the same time, they are not used to point to the film's flaws, quite the opposite. They serve to validate the film's achievements and place it in the lineage of other valuable works. In this regard, these references are also meant to display the critic's taste and literacy. They demonstrate that the critic is familiar with an array of forms of cinema. It is important to note the choice of the texts chosen for these comparisons, however. Together

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<sup>581</sup> Ibid.

<sup>582</sup> See Ewa Mazierska, 'Searching for Survival and Meaning: Polish Film after 1989', in *Cinemas in Transition in Central and Eastern Europe After 1989*, ed. by Catherine Portuges, and Peter Hames (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013), pp. 135-160.

<sup>583</sup> Šafránek, 'Poutavý svět fízla Antonína', p. 35

<sup>584</sup> Adam Gebert, 'Drama nepotřebuje kráčet příliš rychle', *Revolver Revue*, 78 (2010), pp. 223-226 (p. 225).

<sup>585</sup> Aleš Smutný, 'Pouta', *Cinema*, February 2010, p. 45.

<sup>586</sup> Barker, 'News, Reviews, Clues, Interviews and Other Ancillary Materials', p. 2.

they present a rather broad and seemingly random selection. However, they have been chosen for the value they have acquired throughout their existence, either on the festival circuit or through the label of 'classics'.

The above-quoted references that tend to travel the most from one world tradition to another belong to the specialist publications *Film a doba* and *Revolver Revue*. However, even reviews published in more mainstream press were occasionally prone to valorising *Walking Too Fast* through similar references. For example, the above-mentioned comparison to *Oldboy* (Oldeuboi; Park Chan-wook, 2003) appeared in popular magazine *Cinema*. It is also quite telling that several positive reviews compare *Walking Too Fast* to the 2007 winner of the Palme d'Or *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*. One critic therefore thinks that *Walking Too Fast*'s 'poetics recalls some works of the young authors of Romanian New Wave who became a sensation at film festivals a few years ago'.<sup>587</sup> Another critic also thinks that the film 'can also be perceived as an antithesis to the overrated German retro *The Lives of Others*. More correct are those who compare *Walking Too Fast* to the famous Romanian picture *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* in which grim Causseau's dictatorship scrambles out of every shot'.<sup>588</sup> The reference to *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* again serves as evidence that *Walking Too Fast* shows sensitivity to the latest trends and walks in the footsteps of films with accepted cultural status. Indeed, according to one critic, the director Radim Špaček 'returns triumphally after twelve years since his last feature film *Rapid Eye Movement* with a film of European quality'.<sup>589</sup> Popular internet magazine *MovieZone* also praises *Walking Too Fast* in a similar way, opining that 'the right creative bile, that is bored of combing everything neatly, finally starts to boil even in Czech cinema'.<sup>590</sup>

Apart from drawing connections to valorised films that were meant to demonstrate the film's closeness to perceived artistic trends in the world, critics also continued to mark the film's value in opposition to other discourses about Czech mainstream. Continuing to cement the perception that Czech cinema is virtually genreless, *Walking Too Fast* was praised as a welcome genre film. One critic likes that 'In the Czech environment, it's a film that is unusually anchored in a genre, dark thriller, that moreover does not look at the period conciliatorily and with tones of tragicomedy'.<sup>591</sup> In this sentence the critic attempts to

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<sup>587</sup> Jan Gregor, 'Pod okem orla', *Respekt*, 1 February 2010, p. 58.

<sup>588</sup> Jan Foll, 'Pouta', *Hospodářské noviny*, 4 February 2010, p. 13.

<sup>589</sup> Gregor, 'Pod okem orla'.

<sup>590</sup> Vít Schmarc, 'Pouta: Recenze', *MovieZone*, 26 January 2010, available at: <<https://film.moviezone.cz/pouta/recenze>> [accessed 20 February 2020].

<sup>591</sup> Prejdová, 'Pocit, že za oknem přší kamení'.

combine several forms of differentiation from the mainstream. Czech cinema is genreless on the one hand, but also homogenous at the same time. As a result, the status of thriller as genre is accepted, presented as a novelty in Czech cinema, while such status is denied to tragicomedy. Thus, ironically, the film is presented as a rare example of genre film in Czech cinema, despite the fact that the critic clearly differentiates it from a cycle with identifiable patterns and attributes. Another critic praises the film in a similar way: 'Finally a real Czech thriller' she says, expressing her joy that maybe Czech cinema is finally starting to pay attention to 'real' genre rules.<sup>592</sup>

In reviews it therefore remains the case that definitions of genre and its value depend on perceptions of extreme tone which is then used as an alternative to the conciliatory, comforting pleasures of usual Czech fare. As in the example above, 'thriller' is an antidote to the middling tone of tragicomedy. While praising *Walking Too Fast* for its difference, critics describe an array of emotions and responses it evokes. The film was therefore on the one hand 'tense',<sup>593</sup> 'intense' and 'chilling',<sup>594</sup> or 'It keeps the spectator in an unsettling ambiguity that holds him until the end'.<sup>595</sup> However, in many cases critics describe much stronger experiences, some of which are even at odds with usual ideas of pleasure. The film evokes feelings of 'powerlessness' shows 'monstrous marasmus,' is 'dark, depressing',<sup>596</sup> and occasionally even slides into the realm of horror.<sup>597</sup> Again, this seeming moment of genre impurity does not seem to affect the film's value and distinction from the mainstream negatively. As one critic clarifies, these horror elements follow 'more in the footsteps of *The Cremator* rather than American slasher films'.<sup>598</sup> In this example a canonised Czech film serves as a reference and opposition to a yet another construction of the mainstream. In general, the label of horror serves merely to emphasise the film's strongly dark and unpleasant tone. Comparing the viewing experience to the one that Antonín feels in the film, one critic describes the experience of watching *Walking Too Fast* as follows: 'That strange feeling when one cannot take a breath gets under your skin and takes over you at the end. You remain out of breath, just like Antonín'.<sup>599</sup> Another critic thinks that the film

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<sup>592</sup> Podskalská, 'Pouta aneb Jak unikat životu'.

<sup>593</sup> Mirka Spáčilová, 'Pouta, silný favorit filmového roku', *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 2 February 2010, p. 5.

<sup>594</sup> Jiroušek, 'Bezvýchodná deprese plodí šílenství', p. 55.

<sup>595</sup> Gebert, 'Drama nepotřebuje kráčet příliš rychle', p. 226.

<sup>596</sup> Jana Machalická, 'Zpětný pohled na zničující marasmus', *Lidové noviny*, 3 February 2010, p. 9.

<sup>597</sup> Jiroušek, 'Bezvýchodná deprese plodí šílenství', p. 57; Hejdová, 'Estébáci v nás'; Felcman, 'Pouta: Vypovídat upřímně a na úrovni', p. 45.

<sup>598</sup> Hejdová, 'Estébáci v nás'.

<sup>599</sup> Kateřina Borecká, 'Pouta bez dechu', *Literární noviny*, 18 January 2010, p. 15.

‘gets under your skin like an unpleasant rash’ and ‘gradually grinds the spectator down’.<sup>600</sup> Interestingly, comparing the film to a rash, and other similar rhetorical devices are words of praise rather than complaints. However, they follow the culture of preference for pleasures that indicate endurance and contrast to conciliatory pleasures.

Similar emphasis on extremity of experience and tone can be noticed in comparisons critics make between *Walking Too Fast* and *The Lives of Others*. It is interesting to note that the valorised status we saw being attached to *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* is not accorded to *The Lives of Others*, which won the Oscar for the Best Foreign Language Film in 2007. The credentials of *4 Months, 3 weeks and 2 days*, its status as a ‘famous’<sup>601</sup> ‘sensation at film festivals’<sup>602</sup> seems to inspire little suspicion about the film’s value. In fact, these terms are used to validate the film. On the other hand, the successes of *The Lives of Others* do not inspire such respect; it is simply dismissed as ‘overrated’.<sup>603</sup> *The Lives of Others* was easily the most common reference in the ancillary materials, drawn upon even during the film’s promotional campaign. Both films were labelled as thrillers and both were presented as following the story of a secret policeman obsessed with a woman. However, ancillary materials stressed that this is where all similarities stopped. Articles published before the release of the film commonly clarified that the script for *Walking Too Fast* was in works years before *The Lives of Others* was released. In *Walking Too Fast*’s critical reception, on the other hand, critics instead compare the tones of both films. There is virtually no review that does not compare the two films and they often come to the same conclusion – that *Walking Too Fast* is a superior film. While it is not said explicitly in my data, I would argue that the reason why *The Lives of Others* is placed lower in hierarchies of value is partly due to the film’s crossover success. *The Lives of Others* is described repeatedly as relying overly on the derided comforting pleasures for the broadest audience (a criticism reminiscent of Eric Rentschler’s analysis of the film as ‘cinema of consensus’<sup>604</sup>). In other words, *The Lives of Others* was too mainstream.

This impression comes across in descriptions in which *The Lives of Others* is framed as rather ‘impure’ and restrained in its genre pleasures. One critic thinks that the journey of

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<sup>600</sup> Foll, ‘Pouta’.

<sup>601</sup> Foll, ‘Pouta’.

<sup>602</sup> Gregor, ‘Pod okem orla’.

<sup>603</sup> Foll, ‘Pouta’.

<sup>604</sup> Eric Rentschler, ‘*The Lives of Others*: The History of Heritage and the Rhetoric of Consensus’, in *The Lives of Others and Contemporary German Film*, ed. by Paul Cooke (Berlin; Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2013), pp. 241-260.

the protagonist of *The Lives of Others* is quite 'melodramatic'.<sup>605</sup> Contrary to this, *Walking Too Fast* is not guilty of such compromises. According to him, '*The Lives of Others* is a perfectly calculated machine for emotions with an Oscar potential, *Walking Too Fast* offers a rawer material'.<sup>606</sup> In this one sentence *The Lives of Others* is implied to be both lifeless and overly emotional at the same time. Both constructions however serve to position it as a work seeking broad recognition; it is implied to be driven by ulterior motives rather than pure or 'raw' artistic expression. Another critic, on the other hand, thinks that both *The Lives of Others* and *Walking Too Fast* can be connected through similarities in their thematic interests – they both disrupt the perception of communism as something inhuman, 'belonging more to the realm of remorseless machininess than to the empathetic world of humanness'.<sup>607</sup> Instead, these films seem to ascribe a certain level of humanity to the regime. However, *Walking Too Fast* does so 'much more sharply and fiercely .... The centre of action here is not a sad and moving story but instead desire as spiritus agens of everything'.<sup>608</sup> In *The Lives of Others*, conversely, desire 'remains tamed by self-discipline and introverted personality of the secret agent and almost lacks its unmistakable destructive sphere'.<sup>609</sup> *Walking Too Fast* clearly leans to one side of an imaginary scale of pleasures; it is sharper, fiercer, untamed, rawer. It does not restrain itself in order to please the broadest audience but subjects them to discomfort.<sup>610</sup>

As I have argued, the perceived innovation *Walking Too Fast* brought to Czech cinema was a strong aspect in several of the film's valuations. Dark themes and unpleasant elements are repeatedly implied to be missing in Czech cinema, but abundant in the great works of cinema from outside. Several appraisals also referred to canons of art cinema to underline the film's quality. Furthermore, in the process of highlighting extremity and discomfort as signs of quality, critics also occasionally resort to the legacy of suggestions that it is in fact the film's limited accessibility that is at the root of the film's value. As one critic says, 'It doesn't offer a "relaxing" viewing experience, rather a look into the mirror of Czech past (and present) that sometimes doesn't have to be the most pleasant'.<sup>611</sup> One critic therefore finds that the film is 'meant for spectators who can .... at least imagine the depth

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<sup>605</sup> Gregor, 'Pod okem orla'.

<sup>606</sup> Ibid.

<sup>607</sup> Fischer, 'Životy v Poutech touhy'.

<sup>608</sup> Ibid.

<sup>609</sup> Ibid.

<sup>610</sup> It is also striking how much Fischer's rhetoric is similar to Štern's appeal to Czech filmmakers to explore the 'cruel ends ... towards which the logic of life' seemingly always leads.

<sup>611</sup> Hejdová, 'Estébáci v nás'.

of Antonín's emptiness'.<sup>612</sup> Another critic similarly believes that *Walking Too Fast* will be appreciated 'especially [by] spectators sympathetic towards films in which there is no person with whom they would want to identify even slightly, nor a moment that would lighten the feeling of absolute ruin'.<sup>613</sup> In contrast to the easy, restrained, conciliatory, calculated pleasures of the different commercially driven mainstreams, mainly audiences with special predispositions and endurance are implied to be able to appreciate and recognise the film's qualities.

## Conclusions

In this chapter I continued to look at the notions of quality that can be observed circulating in film reviews towards the end of 2000s. I showed that the hostility towards 'comforting' pleasures that I analysed in the previous chapter also transpired in ancillary materials of *Walking Too Fast*. I also highlighted several other perceptions that were being attached to the image of Czech cinema in the media landscape. We saw that Czech cinema is repeatedly found to be lacking in the accounts of Czech critics. However, I showed that the more pointed criticism is often directed at the middlebrow forms rather those accepted as 'low'. It is these middlebrow forms that are described as dominating and being most representative of contemporary Czech cinema. Czech cinema is implied in these accounts to be driven by appealing to notions of quality and decency while at the same time attracting broad audiences. It is described as genre-diffused, restrained and tamed. The populist attitude of these works is seen as standing in the way of riskier approaches to filmmaking that would explore pressing topics more thoroughly. These were the discourses that *Walking Too Fast* largely responded to in its promotional campaign. In fact, the film's consumable identities in ancillary materials relied heavily on opposing associations with more 'commercial' forms of Czech cinema. In contrast to Czech cinema's usual genre hybridity and comforting pleasures, *Walking Too Fast* was presented as a genre film that was not afraid to subject its audiences to dark themes and content.

Similar discourses of value continued to govern the critical response to *Walking Too Fast*. In the environment of formulaic Czech productions, *Walking Too Fast* was embraced by many as an innovative development in Czech cinema. However, I argued that the valuation and construction of the ideal as a riskier and more extreme film can be connected

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<sup>612</sup> Gregor, 'Pod okem orla'.

<sup>613</sup> Míšková, 'Pouta jsou studií psychopatické posedlosti'.

to a particular heritage of discourses that builds the value of cultural products around their limited accessibility. In this regard, the reception of *Walking Too Fast* further demonstrates the ways in which the ideas of quality around Czech cinema are tied to exclusivity rather than broad appeal as was the case in mainstream reception of *Kolya* and *Cosy Dens*. I argued that evaluations of *Walking Too Fast* in fact often tend to uphold the festival film as the ideal of quality that Czech cinema should be following. There is a tendency to reference the works that contain the preferred 'rawness' and extremity rather matter-of-factly without further exploration. As I showed, the references to *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* and other positive references often focussed on the similar evocations of dark tone, but critics did not attempt to further substantiate the value of the referred film. Instead, the reputation of the film was relied on as good enough evidence of its accomplishments. As King has argued, even films that are accorded higher cultural status under the label 'art film' are not immune to formulas and processes of standardisation.<sup>614</sup> Indeed, the repeated emphasis of critics on extremity, darkness and 'exploration of evil' indicates an identification of patterns in the coveted forms of world cinema. However, these patterns tend to be posed as 'trends' rather than formulas. In the Czech context, they are employed as markers of difference from the term 'Czech mainstream film' and therefore of value.

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<sup>614</sup> King, *Positioning Art Cinema*, p. 30.

## Conclusions

In an article on film critics' relationship with Czech films, critic Irena Hejdová describes the atmosphere as follows: 'According to many opinions, contemporary poor quality of (a part) of Czech cinema is also down to the poor quality of film criticism. In the '60s critics influenced and co-created the spirit of the time, today they often preventively call themselves mere "reviewers" and desperately balance on a thin line between appeasing the majority and more educated audiences'.<sup>615</sup> This quote summarises the key themes analysed in this thesis. It brings attention to the re-appearing concerns about the quality of much post-communist Czech cinema. The 1960s repeatedly manifest themselves as the pinnacle of Czech cinema that now, only as a ghost, haunts the less accomplished post-communist cinema. Furthermore, film criticism itself seems to have faced similar qualitative decline as well. Compromised by the populist pull of mass media critics seemingly surrender artistic criteria and weaken their role in nurturing national cinema. As I argued, these concerns about the quality of Czech cinema and criticism rely on shifting ideas about what Czech cinema is and should be. Using historical reception studies, I explored some of these discourses struggling for domination. In this study I focused especially on how Czech cinema is constructed through the category of the retro film. However, occasionally discourses about this particular genre were connected to and indicated discourses about the shape of national cinema more broadly.

### The Shifting Value of the Retro Film

This study highlighted the importance of connecting meanings of films and the perceptions of value through which they are evaluated in ancillary materials to the specific historical conditions that they circulated in. In the analysis of the reception of *Kolya* this thesis emphasised especially discourses about the changes in national cinema industry after the Velvet Revolution in 1989 that were on the one hand a source of unease, but also hopes. On the one hand I argued that the film's ancillary materials constructed the image of Zdeněk Svěrák as an author working in the best Czech comedy traditions. At the same time, the previous work of his son Jan and his tendency to incorporate Hollywood conventions in his

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<sup>615</sup> Irena Hejdová, 'Domáci kritika se shodne jen na kandidátech na plyšáky', *Aktuálně.cz*, 1 December 2007, available at <<https://magazin.aktualne.cz/kultura/film/domaci-kritika-se-shodne-jen-na-kandidatech-na-plysaky/r~i:article:516304/>> [accessed 16 July 2020].



films resonated with hopes for the national cinema's recognition abroad. I demonstrated that the Czechness of the film became the site of struggle of different taste formations. This struggle seems to have decreased in urgency after the film's receipt of an Oscar, which was used by some critics as a validation of the film's value. The vigour with which this point was adopted indicates the extent to which the recognition for cinema and nation was deemed an important value in its own right.

The reception of *Kolya* also relied on a set of elements that were described as very Czech – humour, tragedy, kindness, narrative focusing on ordinary people. This study demonstrated that these elements were highlighted in ancillary materials as values under threat from the dominance of Hollywood in Czech cinemas and broader industrial changes. In fact, I argued that notions of quality articulated in the reception of *Kolya* and *Cosy Dens* were in the mainstream press constructed not only in relation to comedy traditions but also around the idea of 'cultural and cinematic heritage that is rooted in popular audiovisual consumption'.<sup>616</sup> The study shows that the value of these films in mainstream press was negotiated around ideas that see Czech film as welcoming to broad family audiences. This thesis aimed to point to the lack of research on films targeting family audiences in the history of Czech cinema and the variety of meanings such films can have for different audiences. The analysis demonstrated that texts aiming to differentiate themselves from mainstream criticism tend to dismiss the escapist pleasures of such films and therefore these films are often excluded from closer analysis.

This thesis therefore supports Bláhová's argument that elements such as 'humour, a sense for the ordinary, realness between tragedy and comedy, the little Czech man'<sup>617</sup> continued to figure in some critics' evaluations as markers of Czechness long after the release of *Closely Watcher Trains* in 1966. In fact, it is not quite the case that these terms have disappeared from perceptions about Czech cinema. However, their place in hierarchies of value has shifted. While in the reception of *Kolya* and *Cosy Dens* some critics employed these terms as signs of quality, they have more recently been associated with 'mainstream' Czech cinema. Furthermore, this shift not only demonstrates the instability of values but also the extent to which they are tied to claims to authority. The analysis of *Identity Card*'s reception showed that denouncing the old values as outdated became a matter of demonstrating the critic's commitment to keeping up with artistic and critical trends.

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<sup>616</sup> Pitassio, 'Popular Nostalgia', p. 21.

<sup>617</sup> Bláhová, 'České hubičky na vývoz', pp. 83-4.

In the third and fourth chapters I therefore looked at the denouncements of the qualities of previous retro films as outdated. The study of *Identity Card's* reception considered this shift in relation to nostalgia debates that placed at the centre the representation of the communist past. The argument was that nostalgia debates placed emphasis on historical authenticity under the concern that 'nostalgic' representations of the past distort the understanding and memory of the period. It is, however, not the case that ideas of period authenticity were insignificant in the flow of talk around *Kolya* and *Cosy Dens*. In fact, notions of historical authenticity reappeared throughout the data as a constant verifier of film quality. It is instead what is labelled as authentic that shifts in different publications and in time. The nostalgia debates argued especially for the 'unpleasant' realities and questions to be given more space in filmic representations.

As this study showed, nostalgia debates targeted mainly popular films and television series which were seen to exploit and disseminate this phenomenon. I suggested that this shift from previous evaluative strategies of mainstream critics, who were previously commonly constructing the value of retro as comforting entertainment, indicates a development in perceptions about the role of quality cinema. This theme was also confirmed in the last chapter in which the value of *Walking Too Fast* was negotiated in opposition to different ideas of the 'mainstream'. An especially prominent image of the mainstream sees Czech cinema to be dominated by films combining several genres in an attempt to please broad audiences. As a result, *Walking Too Fast's* ancillary materials focused on extremes of discomfort and generic purity to establish the film's 'quality' credentials. On the one hand, this study shows the extent to which the idea of kind tragicomedy for broad audiences continues to be associated with the image of Czech cinema. On the other hand, it also shows that this has increasingly been seen as the kind of film Czech filmmaking should move away from.

### Czech Cinema and the World

This thesis explored several instances in which critics looked outside the Czech borders to negotiate the value of Czech cinema. The analysis of *Kolya* argued that hopes of a return to the quality and recognition of New Wave formed an important context in the promotion and reception of the film. The film's ancillary materials looked especially at Jan Svěrák, who, with his track record of paying homage to and appropriating Hollywood style in his films, was looked at as a young director showing the potential to present the national 'values under

threat' to international audiences. This study looked at the variety of meanings Hollywood accrues under different circumstances. If on the one hand it was associated with the style that could allow Czech traditions to travel and appeal to international audiences, it was also a dominating force in local cinemas and a danger to the national cinema. Furthermore, as this study showed, the film's win of the Oscar also represented an important point in debates about the film's value. Hollywood therefore also represented an institution that was looked at as the final confirmation of the film's quality. The study therefore confirms that categories which figure in evaluations of films are highly discursive and do not rely on consistent claims, but instead put forward differing images for different purposes.

While such strong debates about international recognition were not present in ancillary materials of other films analysed in this thesis, I would suggest that ideas of international recognition continue to figure in notions of value of many critics to some extent. Or rather, the lack of international recognition is perceived as a confirmation of the inferiority of Czech film. This can be glimpsed somewhat in the flow of talk around *Walking Too Fast* which shows that critics' notions of value often looked at examples from outside Czech cinema in order to praise the film. The values of discomfort and genre purity were authenticated by several critics as artistic trends in the world. Furthermore, the texts that criticise the reliance of Czech cinema on tragicomic narratives also similarly compare Czech film with the art film and foreign genre films, indicating therefore the perceptions about what directions Czech cinema should take according to these critics.

### Struggles Between Taste Formations

Just as Czech cinema has often been presented as lacking qualitatively in the discourses analysed, criticism has also struggled in the process of transition to the market economy. In the excerpt above, Hejdová argues that critics, as opposed to the seemingly singular voice with which they helped to shape the 'spirit of the time' in the 1960s, now do not seem to agree on anything. She looks at the critical response to Jan Hřebejk's film *Medvídek* (2007) as symptomatic of the crisis. As she says, 'To analyse which films received general acceptance of Czech media is simply somewhat impossible. While some labelled *Medvídek* as a tame banality, others elevate it as one of the best of Hřebejk's films'.<sup>618</sup> By adopting the historical materialist approach, this thesis aimed to approach the lack of a consensus over a film's value less as a sign of the unfavourable quality of criticism but simply as an indication of a variety

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<sup>618</sup> Hejdová, 'Domácí kritika se shodne jen na kandidátech na plyšáky'.

of different tastes and audiences different publications address. At the same time, such differences and the ways different parts of criticism aim to distinguish themselves from lower forms of criticism is a fascinating terrain for analysis of cultural distinctions and struggles for authority. The analysis of the reception of *Kolya* and *Cosy Dens* shows that claims to authority of 'serious' critics often relied on the dismissal of the popular pleasures of these films and a preference for 'discomforting' representation, as well as more explicit distancing from mainstream criticism.

In my analysis of the reception of *Identity Card* and *Walking Too Fast* I argued, however, that even critics publishing in mainstream publications started incorporating similar emphasis on discomfort in their evaluations of the retro film. On the other hand, this does not mean that differences between taste formations simply disappeared in Czech film criticism. As Hejdová's example of the reception of *Medvídek* shows, differences between critics' evaluative strategies still seem to persist. Similarly, while in my data critics seem to adopt similar notions of value, these notions do not determine the film's reception. For example, by emphasising the 'dark' elements of the film, *Identity Card* was praised by some as a welcome innovation in a familiar genre. On the other hand, other critics rejected it as being virtually the same as previous films – overly conciliatory. Therefore, while similar ideas of value were employed in a range of publications, they emphasised different elements in order to validate or criticise the film. Similarly, while *Walking Too Fast* was generally well received, the variety of identities circulating around the film also provided a range of opportunities for different taste formations to emphasise different elements – the film could for example be criticised for being too 'generic' and not providing enough social commentary, or it could be criticised for not being a pure enough genre film and turning into an arty melodrama, among other things. Despite this, the emphasis on the 'unpleasant' representation of the past was clearly dominant in evaluations of both *Identity Card* and *Walking Too Fast*. Because of the small array of films analysed in this thesis, further research could look at to what extent this emphasis also figures in the reception of films outside the retro genre.

### Studying Czech Cinema

One of the aims of this thesis was to react to the lack of academic work on contemporary Czech cinema. Because of the limited range of films analysed it would be simplistic to argue that this thesis sufficiently fills the gap in existing literature. However, this thesis indicates

that a large amount of writing on Czech cinema has tended to rely on the dismissal of the popular and/or mainstream in claims to authority. I specifically focused on the line of arguments that dismiss pleasures of the popular film as a remnant of the communist ideology. The analysis of nostalgia debates also revealed a concern about the effects of popular culture on the historical consciousness of 'ordinary' people. However, as these analyses pointed out, these arguments rarely go beyond establishing the writer's superior taste and authority. This study suggests that it is also this tendency that is behind the lack of work on post-communist Czech cinema. It seems that if the understanding of contemporary Czech cinema is to become greater, it needs to engage more with terms like 'popular' and 'mainstream' in a more analytical way, explore the contradictions and complexities that imbue the terms, instead of approaching them as ideology materialised.

An interesting phenomenon in notions of value manifesting in the critical discourse in the last decade is the emphasis on genre cinema. In these discourses, genre cinema is approached as belonging to the sphere of 'popular cinema' (as opposed to art cinema). However, as the analysis of the reception of *Walking Too Fast* showed, genre cinema is often considered to figure outside of mainstream Czech cinema. This can also be noticed in an article from *Cinepur* on the few 'genre' films that Czech cinema has produced in the last few years. The critic finds these films noteworthy because they 'avoid most conventions of Czech film mainstream fed mainly by midcult dramedies for local audience, and one can observe in them inspirations in, or even aspirations towards foreign genre trends'.<sup>619</sup> Again, the image of a Czech mainstream dominated by genreless films remains. The need to follow artistic trends observable in the world is also a familiar argument. If anything, these few films seem to indicate that Czech cinema is on the right track since it is giving signs of developing sensitivity to these trends. As the critic continues, 'Together they indicate nothing else than a growing vitality and interest, or need of contemporary Czech cinema to place higher demands on itself'.<sup>620</sup> This critic admits that apart from these characteristics these genre films have little else in common; he even admits that they are not perfect qualitatively. They are simply noteworthy for their unconventionality in the sphere of Czech cinema. While this is certainly a valid reason for an analysis of Czech genre films, it continues to remain the case that the mainstream (which does not only include retro films as analysed in this thesis) does not seem to be noteworthy; not even because of its prominence and seeming persistence in

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<sup>619</sup> Antonín Tesař, 'Volání divokého východu: "Nové naděje" českého žánrového filmu', *Cinepur*, 112 (2017), pp. 52-56 (p. 52).

<sup>620</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.

the sphere of Czech cinema. It seems to me that greater understanding of post-communist Czech cinema can hardly grow unless all forms are paid attention to as worthy objects of study, not only the mainstream middlebrow cinema, but also its 'lowbrow' forms.<sup>621</sup>

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<sup>621</sup> Admittedly, the 'lowbrow' forms of Czech post-communist cinema have started to garner some attention recently. For example in Veronika Pehe, 'Filmy transformace. Kapitalisty proti vlastní vůli', *Novinky.cz*, 4 July 2019, available at: <<https://www.novinky.cz/kultura/salon/clanek/veronika-pehe-filmy-transformace-kapitalisty-proti-vlastni-vuli-40288865>> [accessed 20 July 2020] or in Kamil Fila, 'Privatizační, restituční a prostituční komedie 90. let', *Cinepur*, 127 (2020), pp. 71-77.

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*Accumulator 1 (Akumulátor 1)*, dir. by Jan Svěrák (1994).

*Basic Instinct*, dir. by Paul Verhoeven (1992).

*Bathory*, dir. by Juraj Jakubisko (2008).

*Big Beat (Šakalí léta)*, dir. by Jan Hřebejk (1993).

*Bram Stoker's Dracula*, dir. by Francis Ford Coppola (1992).

*Burning Bush (Hořící keř)*, dir. by Agnieszka Holland (2013).

*Casino*, dir. by Martin Scorsese (1995).

*Closely Watched Trains (Ostře sledované vlaky)*, dir. by Jiří Menzel (1966).

*Cosy Dens (Pelíšky)*, dir. by Jan Hřebejk (1999).

*The Cremator (Spalovač mrtvol)*, dir. by Juraj Herz (1968).

*Die Hard with a Vengeance*, dir. by John McTiernan (1995).

*Divided We Fall (Musíme si pomáhat)*, dir. by Jan Hřebejk (2000).

*The Elementary School (Obecná škola)*, dir. by Jan Svěrák (1991).

*Elizabeth*, dir. by Shekhar Kapur (1998).

*Forrest Gump*, dir. by Robert Zemeckis (1994).

*Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, dir. by Chris Columbus (2002).

*Identity Card (Občanský průkaz)*, dir. by Ondřej Trojan (2010).

*In the Shadow (Ve stínu)*, dir. by David Ondříček (2012).

*I Served the King of England (Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále)*, dir. by Jiří Menzel (2007).

*It's Gonna Get Worse (...a bude hůř)*, dir. by Petr Nikolaev (2007).

*The Lives of Others (Das Leben der Anderen)*, dir. by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck (2006).

*The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, dir. by Peter Jackson (2002).

*Good Bye, Lenin!*, dir. by Wolfgang Becker (2003).

*Kawasaki's Rose (Kawasakiho růže)*, dir. by Jan Hřebejk (2009).

*Kolya (Kolja)*, dir. by Jan Svěrák (1996).

*The Matrix Reloaded*, dir. by Lilly Wachowski, Lana Wachowski (2003).

*Medvídek*, dir. by Jan Hřebejk's film (2007).

*The Mummy*, dir. by Stephen Sommers (1999).

*Oldboy (Oldeuboi)*, dir. by Park Chan-wook (2003).

*Pelle the Conqueror (Pelle Erobreren)*, dir. by Bille August (1987).

*Pupendo*, dir. by Jan Hřebejk (2003).

*The Rebels (Rebelové)*, dir. by Filip Renč (2001).

*The Ride (Jízda)*, dir. by Jan Svěrák (1994).

*Seclusion Near a Forest (Na samotě u lesa)*, dir. by Jiří Menzel (1976).

*The Silence of the Lambs*, dir. by Jonathan Demme (1991).

*The Specialist*, dir. by Luis Llosa (1994).

*Tank Battalion (Tankový prápor)*, dir. by Vít Olmer (1991).

*Taxi Driver*, dir. by Martin Scorsese (1976).

*Timecop*, dir. by Peter Hyams (1994).

*You Kiss Like a God (Líbáš jako Bůh)*, dir. by Marie Poledňáková (2009).

*Walking Too Fast (Pouta)*, dir. by Radim Špaček (2009).

*Waterworld*, dir. by Kevin Reynolds (1995).

*The Wonderful Years That Sucked (Báječná léta pod psa)*, dir. by Petr Nikolaev (1997).

## Teleography

*30 případů majora Zemana* (ČST, 1974-1979).

*Konfrontace Petra Fischera* (ČT art, 2014-2017).

*Sama doma* (ČT1, 1998-).

*Wonderful Times* (Vyprávěj; ČT1 2009–2013).